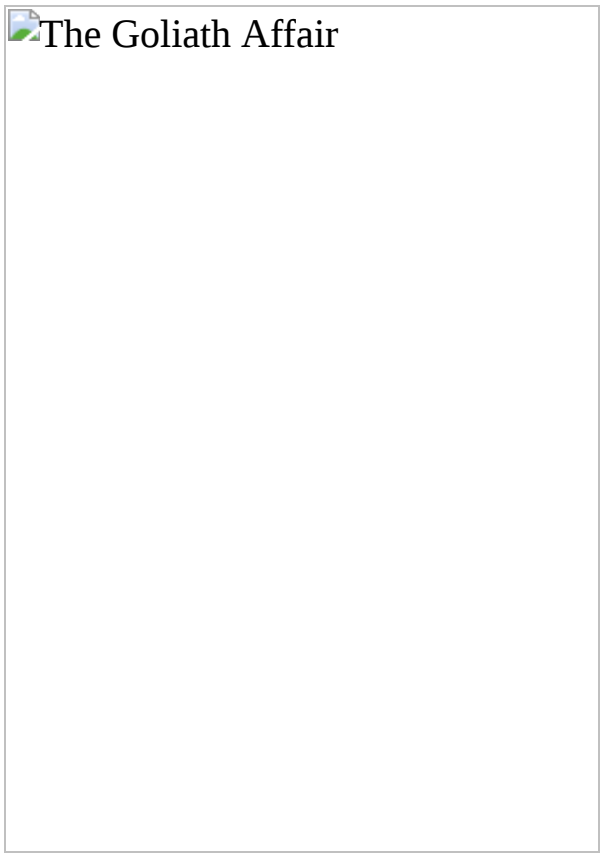
The Goliath Affair

The Goliath Affair

By John Jakes

December 1966
Volume 2, Issue 5

Trapped, lost, two desperate U.N.C.L.E. agents face their greatest peril — a horde of brainwashed, senseless girl monsters, who have been told — "One man must never escape from here alive. His name is Napoleon Solo..."

They knew no law but evil, the laughing giantesses from the Black Forest, who murdered with a caress — and died with a smile. Their leader had said: "This man must not escape. His name is Napoleon Solo!"

PROLOGUE: The Man Who Knocked Them Dead
ACT ONE: Death to All 97-pound Weaklings!
ACT TWO: The Bigger They Come
ACT THREE: The Harder U.N.C.L.E. Falls
ACT FOUR: Pick a Rock, Any Rock—Or Die

Prologue: The Man Who Knocked Them Dead

The comely young lady reposed on a multicolored beach towel, sunning herself. Her hair was long and red. Her figure was superb. Her two-piece white bikini was hardly more than a token acknowledgement of certain laws concerning exposure of the human body. Mr. Napoleon Solo didn't mind at all.

What he did mind was the tantalizing way the redhead kept sipping from a tall, frosty glass of what appeared to be lemonade.

Lying on his belly in the hot sand, with the sun driving a screw of pain into the back of his skull, Solo licked his lips and listened enviously to the tinkle of ice in her glass.

Decidedly odd, Solo thought as he peered at the dune just ahead. On its crest the charming young lady was worshiping the sun with seemingly no ill effects. Suddenly her figure became blurred.

Solo rubbed the back of his left hand against his eye sockets. He couldn't quite focus on her. The sun turned the screw of pain in the back of his head one more full turn.

Odd, he thought again. Until this moment, Napoleon Solo had been unaware that there were any lemonade stands on the Nefud, the fearsome Red Desert of Saudi Arabia.

A voice at his elbow distracted him: "Napoleon? We must keep moving."

Solo turned his head drowsily to his left. There, on his belly, with bulky pistol holsters strapped under his armpits and glittering bullet-filled bandoliers crisscrossing his sweat-black rag of a shirt, Illya Kuryakin provided a decidedly unwelcome distraction.

"Go way," Solo murmured. "You'll disturb her."

Illya's eyebrows quirked downward. "Her? Napoleon, the sun is getting to you. We must keep moving. The station is just over that dune ahead but we are not certain whether the THRUSH unit has been alerted. If they have been, they may be making preparations for a hasty exodus."

Napoleon Solo struggled to his feet, swaying in the light, furnace-hot breeze.

Once he stood up, Napoleon Solo felt miserably ill.

His belly churned. His temples began to vibrate. The tawny endlessness of sand tilted and swam. But the ice in the girl's glass still tinkled.

"Got to ask her where to buy it," Solo mumbled through dry, sun-cracked lips. He stopped. Weird music, all off-key, wailed in his ears. He felt as though he was turning in slow circles, while his heavy desert boots somehow remained stationary in the sand.

Solo tried to lift his right boot. Sand dribbled off the toe. He was hardly his dapper self, clad as he was in disreputable, grease-stained suntans which were supposed to help maintain the fiction that he, like the other two U.N.C.L.E. agents, was a member of a geological search crew whose 'copter had wandered off course.

The tableau held one frozen moment longer: Solo swaying against the background of a brass sheet of sky, his beard sprouted and his eyes not quite sane. On his left, still belly down, Illya Kuryakin, equally sweaty and unkempt, glanced past his friend Solo to a third man, who also lay on his stomach.

The trio had been crawling forward together, mile after skin-flaying mile. The third man had a blunt jaw and blond hair which the sun had bleached white. He was the U.N.C.L.E. station chief at Khaibar. His cable had pulled Solo and Illya out there in the first place.

"Peterson?" Illya formed the man's name silently with his lips. "When I count three—*Jump him*."

Peterson nodded quickly. A single yell from Napoleon Solo could give the game away, could alert THRUSH guards who might be waiting just past the dune. For his part, Napoleon Solo wondered idly why his companions were watching him with such peculiar expressions. Frankly, he found their attention irritating.

Solo wished his head would stop buzzing. The sun-screw tightened again. This time it bored straight down into the top of his skull. Silently and profanely Solo dismissed his companions, bothering only to wave at Illya in disgust.

Illya had gone into a half-crouch. He appeared to be mouthing some nonsense syllables. Napoleon Solo was annoyed by the whole moronic situation.

"Listen," Solo began. "I'm going up there and ask that girl—"

"—three!" Illya breathed, moving fast. He and Peterson jumped Solo from either side.

A startled outcry nearly blasted the desert silence with sound as Peterson and Illya bore Solo to the ground. Fortunately Illya managed to get his left elbow jammed between Solo's teeth. Solo resented this. He thrashed vigorously and attempted to sink his teeth into the bone.

Solo discovered someone's grimy fingers working their way around Illya's elbow into his mouth. Something rolled against Solo's tongue.

"Let go," Peterson cried softly. "I got the pill in him."

Illya whipped his elbow back an instant before Napoleon Solo's outraged molars clamped together. There was a faint crunch as Solo bit through the gelatinous shell of a capsule.

Cool, thick, minty liquid rolled over his tongue. Pinwheels exploded behind his eyes. He passed out.

Solo opened his eyes ten minutes later, groaning.

The simmering sand grated against his right cheek. He had a feeling that he had done something very ill-mannered. He rolled over on his back. Peterson and Illya were hunkering down near him.

Solo struggled to sit up. As he did so his eyes slid past the empty top of the dune just ahead. And he remembered the whole thing.

First came the frantic communique from Peterson stating that operatives of the Saudi Arabian unit had at last located the THRUSH cell. Over the past months the cell had been methodically dynamiting major oil pipelines and leaving evidence behind that the work was done by terrorists who owed allegiance to a nation in this explosive, oil-happy part of the world.

The THRUSH intent, of course, was to create frictions which could lead to an international incident and, if all went well, a disastrous war between two major Near Eastern powers.

Such a war would seriously cripple the flow of petroleum to the world's industrial countries and would create the kind of unsettled situation upon which THRUSH could and would capitalize.

Napoleon Solo looked sheepish. "I know something happened, from the way you're looking."

"We thought," said Illya dryly, "that you planned to yoo-hoo a little greeting to our THRUSH friends over the hill."

"The sun got you," Peterson said. "You saw a girl up there on the dune. She was drinking lemonade."

Solo made a thoroughly adult face. "Lemonade! I did slip a cog."

"Lucky I had the proper capsules with me," said Peterson, with a faint trace of a British accent. "You chaps who come out from Operations and Enforcement to knock over these cells ought to take climatization drill

before popping off to crawl three miles across the Red Desert. We field chaps have the impression that you headquarters chaps train in cocktail bars."

Illya made a sharp gesture. "Let's not fall to bickering. We've work to do."

Peterson mopped his upper lip. "Sorry. The sun even makes me edgy, and I've been out here four years now. But I lost my best man to a dagger in the spine at Khaibar. I don't want this particular little manoeuver to fail. When Tommy turned up knifed, I decided THRUSH had gotten wind that we'd located the cell. If so, they may be hurrying to close down and move on."

Peterson's pale eyes grew extremely hard. "I don't care to see that happen. Tommy was a top U.N.C.L.E. man, you know."

"I'm sorry I cost us time—" Solo began.

Illya ticked a fingernail against the crystal of his watch. "It's already 0715 hours. We're fifteen minutes behind schedule. Shall we move out?"

Some of the buzzing was clearing from Solo's head. He flopped belly-down in the sand. His companions did likewise. Silently the three men began to crawl upward toward the dune's crest, using their elbows and knees to propel themselves along.

Through his sweat-sodden shirt Solo could feel the heat of the desert rising to flay his skin. On his back, where the sun beat, the heat was even worse. And it was as yet only a relatively short time past dawn. Fortunately they soon crawled into a patch of purple shadow on the near face of the dune. From there they worked themselves slowly upward in relative coolness.

Here it felt only 100 or 110 degrees, not 130 or 140.

Solo's mind slid over the events of the past hours. He and Illya had flown in from New York and met Peterson in the city of Khaibar the preceding sunset. In a ramshackle 'copter Peterson flew them roughly northeast out

into the Red Desert. Toward the end of the night Peterson set the 'copter down, using its radar and the stars to hit the precise location he wanted.

At first light they set out overland, their destination three miles away. Solo now felt chagrined that the heat had affected him so drastically, but he didn't indulge in self-pity for long.

They were near the crest of the dune. Demolition of this THRUSH cell was crucially important. Every nerve, every ounce of his mental power had to be concentrated on the fast surprise attack—

"Carefully, chaps," Peterson whispered. "Let's take a peep."

With extreme caution the three U.N.C.L.E. agents raised themselves just sufficiently for a good view of the land beyond the dune.

Perhaps a hundred yards ahead, round, ominous and helmet-shaped, a steel structure protruded above the sand. Its bluish surface appeared unbroken except for the tiny punctuation of rows of rivet heads.

Beyond it a short concrete airstrip, pitted and cracked in many places, stretched away into the blazing, wavering horizon. An unmarked, double-engined turbo-prop plane stood on the ready line at the end of the strip nearest them.

A hot breeze lifted sand whorls here and there. Otherwise nothing moved.

"They're all underground having their morning vodka and potatoes," Illya said with a macabre grin.

"Bacon and eggs," Solo corrected, working one of the special pistols loose from its holster. He palmed the heavy butt and began to insert bullet-like projectiles from his bandoliers into round receptacles at the muzzle end of the weapon.

"Whatever they're eating in that warren under the sand," said Peterson, "shall we interrupt?"

The three U.N.C.L.E. agents worked now with trained precision. Each loaded eight of the special rocket-propelled demolition bullets into the honeycombed ends of the weapons. The guns were the latest innovation of the U.N.C.L.E. research laboratories.

Each man flipped up the homing sight on his weapon, extended his right arm and braced it. In a matter of moments three right arms were aimed out across the dune top at the pillbox.

Solo began to count downward from five. On signal, the three pistols would discharge a total of twenty-four projectiles which would obliterate the pillbox structure above ground and fill the area below with such heat that the THRUSH agents lurking in the tunnels and offices would be crisped.

"—three, two—" Solo counted.

Up from the sand directly in front of him shot a periscope, its glass eye watching him. Klaxons began to warble.

"A trip wire somewhere!" Peterson bawled. "We missed it, damn it!"

At the pillbox, a section of its curved wall facing the dune was rolling back. From the opening a medium-caliber anti-personnel cannon shot forth its wicked barrel. There was a quick, ear-knocking *chuff*. Straight at the dune, a white-sizzling charge came rocketing.

Illya was already throwing himself wildly to the left. Solo followed. Peterson rolled in the other direction. The rocket howled and crashed into the top of the dune where the three U.N.C.L.E. agents had been lying only moments before.

The whole summit seemed to erupt in a white, spurting cloud. A thunderous explosion slammed Solo's ears and threw him forward forcibly three yards. Sandlike glass stung the back of his neck, drawing blood.

"Dirty blighters got the jump on us!" Peterson was on his feet, aiming his demolition pistol at the pillbox.

Illya and Solo began running to their left, Illya going ahead of his friend. Strung out, they presented three targets rather than a single one for the cannon. It was swivelling from left to right and back again as the gunners sought a new quarry.

Where the dune on which they had been lying sloped down, Solo flung himself out on his stomach. The cannon chuffed. A sizzling streak of white fire flashed over his head and blew up the desert two hundred yards behind him. More sand rained down. Solo steadied his right arm and began triggering the demolition pistol.

Another port in the pillbox had opened. Several ill-uniformed Thrushmen with high-powered rifles were stumbling out to do battle, egged on by a shrill-voiced officer who was ordering them forward in Arabic.

The officer remained conveniently screened from danger behind his men. Solo's demolition pistol smoked and bucked. The tiny but potent projectiles spurted out one after another.

Illya was setting up a cross-fire with his own pistol, mowing down the Thrushmen. Solo saw the muzzle of the cannon peel back upon itself, flow limp and molten for a heartbeat of time. Then it disappeared in a flash of scarlet fire. Solo's slugs had found their mark.

Peterson's demolition pistol emitted four lethal blasts before Solo shouted, "Hold your fire! We won't have time to re-load if they try—"

Unfortunately Peterson didn't hear. The morning burst open with a splatter of sound as the engines of the plane shrieked to life. Somehow a pilot had darted out—probably through an escape port on the pillbox's far side—and boarded the plane during the fighting. An escape seemed imminent.

Peterson hadn't let up, either. His remaining four demolition bullets polished off the last of the Thrushmen who had rushed out, including their reluctant officer. The whole near side of the pillbox was a dancing apparition of flame and smoke.

"The plane!" Illya bawled through the noise. "Napoleon, follow me! We must stop the plane!"

Legs churning so hard they ached, Solo raced after his friend. Peterson was right behind.

Solo tried to re-load the pistol on the run, with little success. The heat boiled out from the melting pillbox. Smoke billowed, obscuring the airstrip briefly.

Just as Napoleon Solo caught up with Illya and the two of them started around the left side of the THRUSH station, two men darted from the hidden escape hatch nearest the airstrip and raced for the plane.

One man, of slight stature, wore a rumpled THRUSH uniform and had an attache case handcuffed to his left wrist. That would be the station chief, taking all key documents with him. It was the man lumbering along at the station chief's side who curdled Solo's blood.

Through the smoke the man loomed up, a misshapen apparition with sloping shoulders and arms that hung nearly to his knees. The man had a bulbous, lemon-shaped head of grotesque size. Huge ears stuck straight out. His nose was a gigantic wreck. His eyes seemed to burn through the heat and smoke like brown lanterns as he turned and whipped up a gun which looked like a toy in his huge fist.

The man stood at least six feet eight inches tall, a grotesque giant.

Illya and Solo slammed themselves on the ground for cover as the giant fired. The bullet buzzed harmlessly by. The hatch of the plane had been opened. The section chief was climbing up. The giant aimed a second shot. His gun jammed. He threw it away. His face wrenched into the vilest expression of hatred Napoleon Solo had ever seen.

From the plane's hatchway the chief called, "Don't waste time on them, Klaanger. Hurry—"

Klaanger? *Klaanger*? Somewhere a frantic little bell rang in Solo's mind. But the meaning of the warning escaped him.

The hulking Klaanger turned and lumbered toward the plane. At that moment Peterson came charging up behind Solo and Illya. He went right on past. Peterson's face was black with anger, and he ran with surprising speed for a man of his size.

Illya and Solo went after him, both of them trying to load their pistols on the run so that they could halt the plane.

Peterson dashed out ahead of them, fighting his way through the blast of air from the port engine just as Klaanger hauled himself clumsily up into the hatchway.

Shouting curses, Peterson flung his empty demolition pistol at Klaanger. The weapon whanged off the fuselage, a bad throw. Peterson leaped, caught the edges of the hatchway, intending to pull himself into the plane in a suicidal attempt to stop it.

Solo and Illya had just reached the plane's tail section. They were running at top speed. Wind from the engines blasted them, thrust them reeling back. And in that howling, smoking delirium, the horror came—

Klaanger appeared to crouch down in the hatchway as the aircraft started to roll. The man's liverish lips curled up in a bleak imitation of a smile. He balled his right fist, shot it forward and gave Peterson, who was struggling and hanging there in the hatch, what seemed to be the lightest of taps on the top of the skull.

Peterson's head popped open like a fruit.

For a moment a piercing thread of a scream filled the morning. Then it was drowned out by the roar of the plane's engines. The turbo-prop surged forward. Klaanger hung in the hatchway, laughing uproariously as the THRUSH craft lifted lazily to its escape—

There at the end of the airstrip, caught in the sudden intensified surge of wind from the accelerating plane, Napoleon Solo felt warm droplets against his face. The wind blew blood upon him, and upon Illya. Peterson's blood.

The plane whined, screamed, lifted silver against the flaming circle of the sun. Gradually the noise of the engines diminished. Solo and Illya watched the craft become a speck vanishing far off over the desert. Defeat showed in the slope of their shoulders as they stumbled forward along the blood-spotted runway.

"God in heaven!" Solo breathed.

Peterson's body lay sprawled on the concrete, dead and incomplete. Instead of a head, there was nothing but a grisly gray and red welter, sickening to look upon.

Illya's eyes were soot-stained, haunted. "What sort of a monster was that man, Napoleon? To do that with a tap, a little tap—" Wonderingly, Illya raised his own rather fragile-looking right hand and stared at it. "Just a tap of one hand."

Behind them silence enfolded the destroyed pillbox. Here and there hot metal creaked. Solo's voice sounded harshly:

"I've seen that man somewhere, Illya. Somewhere a long time ago I saw him. I remember something else. He wasn't tall. He was scrawny. Small and scrawny. But it was the same face. I know it was the same face. Or—almost."

Slowly Napoleon Solo turned and stared into the sun-blasted sky. The plane had gone. What lingered was the dawning significance of the horror which the two U.N.C.L.E. agents had discovered at what they had thought was the end, not the beginning, of a mission.

Raspy-voiced, Illya put it into words:

"What is THRUSH breeding, Napoleon? Supermen?"

ACT ONE — Death to All 97-pound Weaklings!

ONE

Had it not been for one relatively small piece of evidence, Mr. Alexander Waverly would have been unconvinced.

The evidence lay in the center of the motorized revolving conference table in the center of the chamber which served as the planning room for U.N.C.L.E.'s Operations and Enforcement Section.

This chamber was located high up in the unbelievably modern and complex offices and research facilities located behind a front of decaying brownstones on a certain street in the East Fifties.

Arms folded across his immaculate tweed jacket and perpetually unlit pipe clenched between his teeth, Mr. Waverly slowly circled the conference table. He stared down at the item of evidence with an *I really wish you hadn't brought this up* expression on his lined face. At last he halted and uttered a short, emotion-charged word.

Napoleon Solo was lounging in one of the deep leather armchairs near the table. His right eyebrow hooked up in surprise. Mr. Waverly's resorting to purple language was highly unusual, to say the least.

Mr. Waverly waved his pipe stem at a small, curled, three-by-five inch photo print lying on the table. "We have quite enough bonfires burning at this very moment. We are stretched thin in terms of personnel. Now you bring this back. I don't know where I'm going to find agents available to handle it."

Napoleon Solo reached inside his faultlessly tailored dark blue blazer and extracted a thin two-dollar cigar. He lit it and inhaled the pungent tobacco with relish. He wasn't much of a smoker. It hampered his physical conditioning. But this cigar symbolized his return to civilization.

He and Illya had been back in the U.S. less than thirty-six hours. He had finally succeeded in scrubing and scouring all the Saudi Arabian sand out of his pores. Liberal doses of antibiotic lotion had somewhat mitigated the blistering sunburn pain which had set his skin on fire just as he and Illya had regained the 'copter after the attack on the THRUSH station.

On the long flight back to America via a commercial jet—poor Peterson's remains were flying specially crated in the cargo hold—Solo sat miserably in his seat by the window. The brace of charming young things in trim uniforms who serviced the plane's first-class compartment hovered over him, solicitous and eager to minister to his comfort with pillows or cocktails.

The sunburn unmanned him, made him feel awkward and adolescent. How in heaven's name could you carry on amusing, provocative conversation with a pretty girl when every other minute you were scratching your ribs through your shirt?

Besides, there was the evidence: the evidence carried in a flat black leather card case in Solo's inside jacket pocket. It served to depress him thoroughly as he thought about its significance for the entire flight.

Just before departing from the annihilated THRUSH station in the desert with Peterson's remains wrapped up in a canvas, Illya had popped open the crystal and face of his oversized watch and aimed the revealed inner workings at the sorry bundle of flesh slowly gathering flies on the blood-spattered airstrip.

Illya Kuryakin snapped the picture. The technical office in Port Said processed the film for them. Thus they were able to show Mr. Waverly a photo of Peterson's body moments after the head had literally been knocked off by the man Klaanger.

Now, while Solo puffed on his cigar, Mr. Waverly examined the photo again. Then he tossed it back onto the table.

"Incredible," was Mr. Waverly's comment.

"I'd say impossible," Solo spoke, "except that Illya and I saw it happen."

"I cannot believe that a human fist could do such damage, Mr. Solo."

"No, sir, not my fist, or yours. But Klaanger's did."

"Such a thing is simply not to be countenanced!" Mr. Waverly gestured rather melodramatically, as if trying to convince himself.

There was no escaping the depressing possibility that the dreaded organization against which U.N.C.L.E. had fought had once again discovered a way to twist and warp the laws of nature to serve its own malevolent ends.

Mr. Waverly walked to the window. He ticked his pipe stem against the sill and gazed out at the light-spangled panorama of New York by night. Softly he said, "My first inclination is to dismiss the man who did this thing as some kind of freak. A throwback, a biological monster of the sort which the world unfortunately does produce from time to time. But then, Mr. Solo—" Waverly turned to confront his agent with a piercing, skeptical gaze. "—then you inform me that you recognized his face."

Solo nodded. "I did. Unless the sun drove me completely loony twice in a row, I'd swear that the man I recognized was—well, wasn't so big the time I saw him in Germany. That's why I thought it was important to bring it to your attention."

On a table under the now-blank closed circuit television screen, a blue stud on a white phone lit up suddenly. Mr. Waverly picked up the receiver.

He muttered a monosyllable, hung up.

"That was Mr. Kuryakin. He's waiting for us in the audio-visual conference room."

Alexander Waverly started toward the door. Solo jumped up to follow. Pneumatic devices hissed the steel panels aside. They moved along briskly

down a hall walled in stainless steel. Recessed ceiling lights blinked blue, amber, red, in signal patterns.

An operative in shirt-sleeves and a pistol in a shoulder holster emerged from an open doorway carrying a number of coded flimsy reports. He passed one to Mr. Waverly, who scanned it, initialled it and passed it back.

"Tell the Honolulu station that Mr. Solo and Mr. Kuryakin will fly out to interrogate the prisoners tonight."

The agent vanished back into the room, while Napoleon Solo did his best to control an expression of surprise.

Briskly Waverly started on, his heels clicking on the highly polished floor. They entered an elevator. In seconds they arrived on another floor. Visions of a chic little vocalist named Mitzi—she was currently appearing at an intimate supper club downtown—fleeted poignantly through Solo's mind as he said:

"Sir, I believe you mentioned Honolulu?"

"That's correct, Mr. Solo. I told you we were spread thin. A three-man THRUSH oceanographic craft was captured by a U.S. Navy destroyer in the Pacific yesterday. The craft's atomic batteries malfunctioned. We have three extremely valuable prisoners in irons in Hawaii at this moment. Unfortunately our best people from that area are on Taiwan, attending to another serious matter.

"Therefore I'm sending you and Mr. Kuryakin out to Honolulu to pry as much as you can from our three hooked fish. Perhaps you understand now, Mr. Solo, why this matter of the man with the heavy fist has come at the wrong time. Naturally we must attend to it, explore its possible implications. But it is not making our task any easier, I'll tell you that."

Waverly paused at the entrance to the audio-visual conference room. "Mr. Solo, may I ask why you are suddenly looking like a distempered codfish?"

"Oh, sorry," Solo said. "It's just that I haven't had a night off in two months -"

"Yes, well, ahem. THRUSH waits for no man, Mr. Solo."

"Neither does my thrush, I'm afraid," Solo muttered darkly, waving a sentimental farewell to the shapely young chanteuse with whom he'd planned to enjoy a few of the pleasures of civilized life this evening.

Illya waited for them inside the conference room. He was walking up and down impatiently beside a highly polished board room table. He looked a bit gritty around the eyes, and his putty-colored suit contrasted with the unusual lobster hue of his sunburned face. From his expression, it was clear that he did not have pleasant news for them:

"It took the computers all of three minutes to locate our man, Mr. Waverly. His name is Klaanger. General Felix Klaanger. Look here, sir—"

Illya turned to a console, depressed one of many colored studs. The light level faded as a rheostat took over. Soundlessly an ultra-wide screen descended from the ceiling on the far wall.

The slim agent touched another stud. A harsh black and white image flashed onto the screen. The slide showed two views of a man's head and torso, one full front, the other profile.

In the darkness Solo felt his palms prickle. Even in monochrome, the face on the screen had that same circular, fanatical luminence which Solo recalled from the dreadful moment in the desert when Klaanger had turned back at them just before making his getaway in the THRUSH aircraft. But there were subtle differences.

Solo said, "That certainly *looks* like the same man—"

"Not quite, Napoleon," Illya said. "This picture is one of several thousand confiscated from the files of the Nazi High Command at the end of World

War II. It's over twenty years old. Klaanger of course would be much younger here."

"It's the same man and it isn't," Solo went on, musing aloud. "He's changed. And it's more than just the age. The man I remember was smaller. But the changes are more than a matter of size." Solo crossed through the beam of the projector. His shadow momentarily obliterated the cruel, arrogant, slender face staring out at them. Pausing at Mr. Waverly's elbow, Solo continued, "The man we saw in the desert was—how can I describe it?—kind of a grotesque oversized caricature of that man up there."

"He was none too gentle looking, even twenty years ago." Illya was looking at the thin-lipped, high-cheekboned image spread across the glowing screen.

"But he looks worse now," Solo replied. "His head, for one thing. It's changed. It's huge, almost as though someone had converted it to putty and pushed it and thumbed it until it became two or three times bigger than its original size. I don't know whether I can properly communicate the difference to you, Mr. Waverly."

"I read about Klaanger in connection with the Nuremburg trials. He was on trial with the rest of those high ranking Nazis. One morning I remember reading in the newspaper that they'd found a body in his cell. It wasn't his body. The face had been destroyed with acid. The dental records showed there had been a switch. Klaanger was one of the very few who was caught and got away. I remember the picture of him. He wore his general's hat with the SS markings."

Mr. Waverly coughed. "All right, Mr. Kuryakin. That's enough of the picture."

"Thank you, sir." Illya touched a stud. The image faded. The screen rolled up again and the light level increased. "I was looking at him for ten minutes before you came in. It's not any particular treat. If you look quite hard you can very nearly see some of those three million persons he sent to the gas ovens with his signature."

A peculiar tension was in the room. Mr. Waverly peered at the fingernails on his right hand in the slightly cross-eyed way that was typical of his deep concentration. Illya removed a folded blue sheet from his pocket. In the act of unfolding it, he rattled it. Mr. Waverly glanced up, spoke:

"Thus far, gentlemen, all we have in the way of solid evidence is a single photograph of Peterson with his head gone. Then there's Mr. Solo's conviction that a curiously misshapen giant in Saudi Arabia bears a resemblance—a resemblance only—to a Nazi officer named Felix Klaanger. Is there anything more substantial? After all, Mr. Solo, you had one bout with the sun out there."

"I just have a feeling about it, sir," Solo said. "I'm certain it's the same man."

Alexander Waverly allowed his voice to become somewhat more soothing. "Very well, Mr. Solo. Your judgment has proved excellent on other occasions. And I trust you gentlemen will forgive my seeming reluctance to become interested in this matter. I *must* be interested, of course. But we are going through a rather difficult period in the organization. Several assassinations of operatives have thinned our ranks. If THRUSH attempts to attack on still one more front, we may be in grave difficulty. I wish we had some additional evidence so that we might assign a priority to this problem —"

Illya rattled the blue sheet of paper again. "This won't convince you, sir, in the sense that it's inconclusive regarding what THRUSH might be up to. But I believe it's interesting in the light of Napoleon's recollections—"

"What is that, Mr. Kuryakin?" Waverly asked.

"Some dossier data excerpts from the material the computers fed out concerning Felix Klaanger. If you'll permit me—"

Illya began to read, skimming over details of Felix Klaanger's birth in a suburb of Berlin, his rise to eminence within the Nazi party, and his sordid history as a mass executioner during World War II.

"That is by way of background, sir." Illya went on. "Here are the significant points. General Klaanger did manage to escape from Nuremburg at war's end. As of this writing he is still at large. He was seen as recently as three years ago in both Portugal and Argentina. Most interesting of all are these items from the section of the dossier marked *Description*." Illya read out in a flat voice, " Hair, brown. Eyes, brown. Distinguishing marks, none. Height, five feet three and one half inches. Weight, one hundred and eleven pounds."

Solo burst up from the chair where he'd sprawled a moment ago. "Five feet three?"

"I'm sure this record is correct, Napoleon," Illya said. "Of course the details were compiled twenty years ago."

"Mr. Waverly, the man we saw in the desert stood nearly seven feet tall. He weighed well over two hundred pounds."

Into the quietness of the conference room where filtered air whispered through wall ducts crept a new atmosphere of tension and menace.

Mr. Waverly rose. He began to pace, fingers laced behind his back.

"Let us assume that Mr. Solo's memory is not faulty and that the Klaanger of Nuremburg and the Klaanger of the desert are one and the same man. In destroying the desert headquarters of the THRUSH cell, you gentlemen successfully closed off one source of harassment.

"On the other hand, the presence of this man Klaanger as an aide to the THRUSH station chief—oh, by the way the station chief was picked up in Vienna at six last night. Picked up in a garment cleaning van and taken—well, no need to give you the grisly details. Only Klaanger slipped through the net. His presence in the desert is disturbing.

"Mr. Kuryakin, you alluded to Klaanger having been seen in certain countries known to harbor ex-Nazis. Does the report contain anything to

indicate that Klaanger has been engaged in activities designed to bring the Nazi party to life again?"

Illya ticked his index finger against the blue sheet. "Some suggestions of that only, sir. He is rumored to be a motive power behind the Fourth Reich. But you know how such things go. The iceberg theory. One-tenth is visible, nine-tenths are hidden from sight. I think we can assume that if Klaanger still has Nazi sympathies, he will be actively at work preserving the party for a return bout, as the American fight announcers put it."

Under his breath Mr. Waverly murmured a single strained syllable of anguish. Then he straightened, becoming more his old, business-like self.

"Assume then also, gentlemen, that some sort of working coalition has been formed between the remnants of the Nazi party and THRUSH. Assume that somehow, by means of its devious and sophisticated technological resources, THRUSH has found a means to increase the size and muscular capability of a human being. We have evidence to suggest that a man who once stood five feet three and weighed one hundred and eleven pounds has somehow been changed, mutated, so that his height has increased by nearly two feet, and he has gained weight and become a creature of nearly superhuman strength.

"If this is so, U.N.C.L.E. faces an extreme crisis. What if THRUSH has discovered a means to manufacture creatures as powerful as Klaanger? What if this is nor merely an isolated, freakish phenomenon but the beginning of a planned program to put scores of these extremely powerful operatives into the field? With such a force THRUSH could in a very short time decimate our own forces and bring us to our knees. And the world as well."

Mr. Waverly paused. His tone hardened. "We are stretched thin. But we cannot afford to overlook the possibility that a new and massive THRUSH menace confronts us. You gentlemen have convinced me of that."

Napoleon Solo uttered a long, relieved sigh. "For a couple of minutes I was afraid you were going to retire us to the funny farm."

"I did not say I was convinced that Klaanger is the first of a new breed of incredibly strong THRUSH agents, Mr. Solo," Waverly corrected.

"You didn't?" Solo said, distressed.

"No. But I am convinced we must find out whether it's so."

"Napoleon and I can take over the job," Illya put in.

Waverly shook his head. "I cannot spare you immediately. We will issue a world-wide Phase B alert, with detailed information on Felix Klaanger. As soon as he is spotted somewhere, I will try to release you to follow up. Until then—Mr. Solo, what are you doing?"

"I was just practising my ukulele fingering." Solo glanced at Illya. "We have at least one more assignment coming up before we can tackle Herr Klaanger."

Now it was Illya's turn to raise an eyebrow. "Assignment? I thought we were dining downtown tonight. With that little singer friend of yours. What's her name? Trixie?"

"Mitzi," said Solo with a sigh.

"You told me she had a friend," Illya said.

"I regret that must wait," announced Mr. Waverly. "You two are going to Hawaii while I put the complete U.N.C.L.E. network on Phase B alert."

In Napoleon Solo's mind, visions of marching men, ominous shadows against a darkened sky, bedeviled him. They were all identical—huge slab shoulders; arms that hung nearly to their knees; heads that were bulbous and lemon-shaped. *An army of Felix Klaangers marching on U.N.C.L.E.. On the world.*

No ordinary U.N.C.L.E. operative, no matter how fine or rigorous their training, could stand against men of Felix Klaanger's strength. And it was

the thin line of U.N.C.L.E. operatives, in the last analysis, which maintained the delicate balance between peace and anarchy, and staved off time and time again the drive of THRUSH for world domination.

This time THRUSH might succeed if Klaanger was not located. And soon. Things were very bad. Solo and Illya were needed in Hawaii. Precious days would slip by—

"I don't understand this Hawaii business," said Illya.

"Mr. Solo will explain it to you," Mr. Waverly said.

"*Aloha*, Mitzi," Solo said. Thinking of what THRUSH might be up to while they raced around on other, equally pressing assignments he wondered whether it would be *aloha, world* before very much longer.

TWO

Three weeks, two days, six interrogations, four hand-to-hand combats and one extended visit to Greenland later—after the Hawaiian affair was handled, Illya and Solo had to extinguish a bonfire of THRUSH sabotage directed at the free world's missile defense system—Felix Klaanger was sighted on a street in Munich, Germany by an U.N.C.L.E. man on station there.

Cables flew back and forth from Europe and America. Solo and Illya were jetted to Manhattan on the first available U.N.C.L.E. craft out of Greenland. By the time they arrived and received their orders from Mr. Waverly, another cable had come in from the European branch of Policy and Operations, informing the entire network that the agent who had spotted Klaanger after identifying him from his picture had turned up dead in a sewage ditch.

That is, portions of him had turned up.

A torso.

A leg.

Enough of his lower skull and jawbone for dental identification.

And nothing else.

It was as though incredibly strong hands had simply torn the man's body apart and scattered the pieces.

Beyond the ceiling-high plate glass of the airport waiting room, drizzling rain fell.

The morning was heavily overcast. Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin waited in line with the ninety or so passengers who were preparing to board the immense, four-engined jet with Air Deutschland markings. The jet sat out there on the ready line like a dull silver bird. A passenger agent had just announced over the loudspeaker that despite the bad weather, Flight 414 for London and Munich was expected to depart on schedule.

Solo had been feeling unaccounttably tense ever since their taxicab deposited them at the Air Deutschland terminal at Kennedy International. He felt eyes crawling over him. Illya appeared unconcerned. He was studiously lost in a pamphlet on isometrics.

"After all, Napoleon," he had remarked while making the purchase at the newsstand, "if I am to go up against Herr Klaanger and his fellows in physical combat, I am approximately two hundred pounds behind. Perhaps I can add a couple of inches to my biceps just on the trip across. You're never good company. All you do is ogle the stewardess."

More accurate words had never been spoken, especially in reference to this particular trip. Solo was distracted from his visual search of the waiting room by the sight of the Air Deutschland flight crew. The crew had appeared outside the waiting room window.

As the crew members hurried toward the plane, one of the young ladies assigned to make the passengers more comfortable developed some

difficulty with her nylons. She paused outside the waiting room window to examine the back of her trimly Teutonic left calf.

Despite the rather unexciting cut of her blue and white-piped airline uniform, she was a shapely pasty, Solo could see. A big, healthy-looking German girl with sparkling blue eyes, yellow hair and pretty, generous lips. Solo admired her tantalizing hip action as she darted on through the drizzle and ran up the stairs into the plane. He hoped she was assigned to first class.

Abruptly, then, Solo had something else to worry about. He finally localized the source of the uneasy, *they're-watching-us* feeling. Carefully he unfolded a copy of the *Times* and appeared to scan it. Over the top of the sheet he peered obliquely at a man lounging near the water cooler.

The man was portly, wore an eggshell-colored raincoat and a green Tyrolean hat with a gaudy feather in the band. Despite the day's somberness, the man also wore immense sun glasses. Their lenses reflected the fluorescent lights in the ceiling in blue-white star bursts.

Gently Solo nudged his companions. Still pretending to read, he whispered, "Notice the job by the cooler."

Illya feigned total absorption in isometrics, but his eyes moved quickly over and back.

"The one with the oversized shades," he said. "He jostled me at the magazine stand."

"I don't think he's boarding," Solo said.

"No, and he doesn't appear to be saying good-by to his *frau*, either. He's just watching us."

Solo's mind clicked and whirred ahead. Since the U.N.C.L.E. operative who had sighted Klaanger in Munich had been killed, chances were good that U.N.C.L.E.'s interest in Klaanger's whereabouts was already known.

Thus THRUSH could quickly have spread an observation net aimed at pegging down known U.N.C.L.E. agents traveling in the direction of Germany. What distressed Napoleon Solo was the open nature of the manoeuver. He had seldom known THRUSH to employ operatives who would make themselves so obvious. Those sunglasses stood out too sorely in the terminal.

Of course every organization had its incompetents. Perhaps this agent was one of them.

Perhaps there was a perfectly logical reason for the man standing next to the cooler, a reason which had nothing to do with THRUSH at all. Still, the pattern would bear watching. If a tail turned up at the Munich end also, Solo and Illya would be operating under a new handicap. They would know they were tagged before they even began the investigation.

"Here we go," Illya said loudly. The line began to move past the booth where an Air Deutschland passenger agent with a pasteboard smile examined the tickets of boarders.

Moments later Solo and Illya were hustling through the rain towards the first-class boarding stairs.

"Ooops," Solo exclaimed, faking the accidental dropping of his attache case. Bending to retrieve it, he peered back past his right knee.

Herr Sun-glasses was standing next to the waiting room window, still watching. His hands were deep in the pockets of his eggshell-colored raincoat.

Solo scooped up his case and ran after Illya.

At the head of the stairs the pleasantly-proportioned German pastry Solo had noticed before was waiting to greet passengers:

"*Guten morgen*, gentlemen. May I see your tickets?"

The stewardess gave Napoleon Solo a sizzling smile. He returned it in kind. Although the point of her jaw was a trifle strong, almost blunt, her features were otherwise nearly perfect and quite lovely. He continued to grin winningly while Illya went to his seat.

Solo juggled his attache case awkwardly from hand to hand.

"I wonder whether you could get rid of this for me, fraulein—"

The girl quickly filled in the verbal blank which Solo had created:

"Fraulein Bauer. Of course. May I have it, please?"

Solo transferred the case to the girl's hand, experiencing in the process a not unpleasant contact with her soft fingertips. This reassured him that the flight might be diverting after all.

Fraulein Bauer was about to stow the bag in a compartment just behind her when she noticed the white embossed plastic tag hanging from the handle.

The tag bore Solo's full name and the address of a bogus Manhattan flat.

"What an interesting first name," said the Fraulein. "Are you French?"

"Well, temperamentally I guess," Solo replied with a good-natured leer.

The girl laughed. A passenger waiting outside in the damp at the top of the ramp complained about the delay.

"See you later," Napoleon Solo said by way of invitation, and marched down the aisle to his seat beside Illya.

"You think of romance at the most unlikely times," Illya grumbled as Solo sat down.

"Can you think of a better time? Our U.N.C.L.E. in Munich, U.N.C.L.E. Doremus—" That was the code for the station chief. "—won't be back until

tomorrow morning. We'll have a free evening. So will all the young ladies on the flight, I assume. Munich is the end of the run."

Illya looked miffed. "I intend to devote myself to isometric exercises. I consider that somewhat more practical."

"But dull."

Solo really didn't feel all that jolly.

He could still glimpse the watcher in sun glasses through the oval window at Illya's left.

Fraulein Bauer was busily hanging up coats, soothing an elderly lady who had never flown before, offering a pillow to a young mother who spoke only French and carried a squalling baby. Even though these duties kept her occupied, she still had enough time to glance Solo's way once or twice and smile.

Illya was above it all. He laced his fingers together and pulled hard until his cheeks began to redden from the tension.

Then he relaxed and repeated the exercise.

Solo kept studying the delightful way Fraulein Bauer's trim legs were attached to the remainder of her equally delightful form. He concluded that as a companion for a lonely secret agent at liberty in a strange city, she would be ideal. He'd have to get busy—

Ten minutes after the flight was airborne, Solo had arranged the date.

THREE

At the Munich airport, another of those oddly obvious watchers picked them up and followed them at a distance from the baggage reclamation area. This man was a slight, rat-faced individual in a cheap suit of somber

hue. He walked with a decided limp in his right leg. He smoked a cigarette by holding it from beneath, with thumb and right index finger.

In the taxicab which carried them away from the airport toward the Hotel de Luxe, Solo and Illya decided that this was a cross they would have to bear, at least until they met with their contact the section chief tomorrow morning.

The rodent-featured individual hopped into a Volkswagen just to the rear of the taxi rank and drove behind them by about six car lengths all the way to the hotel.

They registered as Herr Solo and Herr Kuryakin, sales representatives for International Elementary Education Materials, Inc., of New York City. Rat-face was still lingering in the plush, chandeliered lobby as the bellboy bore their bags into the elevator. As the elevator doors closed, Solo and Illya saw their shadow break into a quick stride and head for the bank of phones at the back of the lobby.

In front of the bathroom mirror in their suite, Napoleon Solo adjusted his tie. Illya Kuryakin lounged in the doorway. "I hope you and the Fraulein have a pleasant evening."

"Your sincerity overwhelms me. And you heard her say she had a friend."

Illya shrugged. "Mitzi, Betsy, Trixie—They always have friends. I was not cut out to be the excess baggage in your romantic life. I prefer to go my own way, thank you."

"With isometric tension to keep you company. Well, have a ball."

Solo slipped into his well-cut dinner jacket and sauntered to the phone. He rang up the service desk and ascertained that his rented Mercedes was ready at the main entrance. Noting the way Illya paced back and forth, Solo frowned.

"Look, you've never raised a rumpus when I've had a date before."

"Fiddlesticks, Napoleon," Illya snapped. "It has nothing to do with your date."

"Then what's wrong?"

"All the Thrushes are twittering right out in the open where we can't miss them. The fellow with the sun glasses in New York. Rat-cheeks the moment we arrive here. *That*."

Irritably Illya gestured toward the baseboard. The remains of a pulverized electronic device measuring half an inch on a side glittered dully. A quick search of the room upon arrival had turned up the device at once. It was crudely affixed to the rear side of a chair leg with electrical tape. One fast stamp of Napoleon Solo's right heel had rendered it useless.

"It's almost as though they're begging us to notice them, Napoleon. That's not like them. What does it mean?"

"I don't know," Solo admitted. "Unless it's all one huge red herring."

Illya's brow puckered. "Possible. But then where's the authentic fish?"

Solo shook his head. He reached into the side pocket of his jacket and brought out the short rod-like pocket communicator.

Twisting it, he aligned the notches to the correct position. A similar device which belonged to Illya and was currently resting on an expensive coffee table began to emit a low, not displeasing, warble.

Quickly Solo unscrewed the upper part of his communicator. Now he had a cylinder in his palm only half an inch in diameter and perhaps two inches long.

He manipulated a trick fold in the lining of his dinner jacket, slipped the small part of the communicator out of sight and re-buttoned the jacket. The communicator on the coffee table continued to warble, though at a lower pitch.

"There," Solo grinned. "You can keep track of me all night."

"Don't hang your jacket in some soundproofed closet," Illya said. "If the signal weakens the slightest bit, I'll be after you. You wouldn't want to be rudely interrupted, but I'll do just that unless you stay in range."

"Thanks. I'll remember." Solo walked toward the door. "Still time to change your mind and come along."

Illya flopped into a chair and picked up his isometrics pamphlet.

"No, I'll stick at this. With Herr Klaanger and his muscles lurking somewhere backstage, I feel like the typical ninety-seven pound weakling always facing the rotten end of things in those body-builder advertisements."

Remembering Peterson's ghastly corpse, Solo said, "Don't we all?" and bowed out.

FOUR

The motor of the Mercedes purred. Behind, the light-spangled area of ultra-modern apartments slid away into the Munich dusk. Solo said, "Where?"

"A left turn at the next corner," Helene Bauer said. "That is, if you favor good dark beer and quite elegant *wienerschnitzel*."

"I've always been a veal man. Lead me to it, charming Fraulein Bauer. I was lucky to discover you."

"Ordinarily, Herr Solo," she said in a bantering voice, "I would not have accepted your invitation on such brief acquaintance—"

"I'll bet you say that to all the passengers."

"Herr Solo—Napoleon—I do not!" Her blue eyes blazed prettily. Then she snuggled against his side and linked her arm in his. "With you—well, you

have *der teufel*'s sparkle in your eye, that's all. And I had a free evening. Do we need further explanations?"

"Not a one," he said. His eyes ranged up to the rear-vision mirror. Clipping along behind them through the pools of light thrown by street lamps was a Volkswagen which Solo was sure had been parked near Helene Bauer's apartment. Unless he was mistaken, the driver of that automobile was rat-faced.

Fortunately Helene Bauer was pretty enough in her swirling dress of bluish lacy stuff and her white knit stole to take his mind off mundane concerns, such as the possibility of a THRUSH agent on their tail. She nestled against his side, smelling delightfully of soap and a light, pleasing perfume. Altogether a charming companion for an evening of fun.

Shortly they reached the narrow, dim-lit street where, Helene promised, they would find a restaurant of excellent reputation. This turned out to be *Der Goldenne Schwann*, or so a lemon-colored neon sign above a shabby-looking cellar entrance announced. The other buildings in the area were blacked-out commercial establishments.

Expensive American and European vehicles were parked bumper to bumper on both sides of the street near the restaurant. As they tooled past, Solo heard the raucous noise of a concertina.

"I thought we only had parking problems in America," he grumbled.

"There is a parking area to the rear, I think," Helene answered. "Turn in here."

Solo swung the wheel. The Mercedes bumped along a short alley. At the end lay a small asphalt lot with room to accommodate a dozen cars. Half the slots were already taken. One of the parked cars was a silver-gray Rolls Royce that brought a whistle of admiration to Solo's lips as he parked.

The lot was illuminated by one dim spotlight high up on a steel pole. Long shadows of the parked cars spread out over the ground. Solo hopped out

and ran around to the left side to assist Helene. He felt somewhat more relaxed. He felt somewhat more relaxed. Just as he turned into the alley, he'd checked the street behind them. There was no sign of the pursuing Volkswagen at all.

"Well," he said in a chipper voice as he reached a hand inside and clasped Helene's warm fingers, to help her out, "here we are, all set for an evening of—"

His right hand began to burn with agonizing pain.

Helene Bauer's face had lost its placid prettiness. Her lips were compressed tightly. Her blue eyes glittered in the reflected glow of the high spotlight. She had closed her fingers around Solo's hand and was squeezing with such fierce power that he groaned in pain and surprise.

"What the devil kind of parlor game is—" he began, trying to jerk his hand away. He couldn't.

Helene squeezed harder, a thoroughly unpleasant smile on her face. Without any appearance of effort, she applied tremendous pressure.

Solo's whole arm heated up with agony. He let out an ungentlemanly yell and went to his knees.

Daintily raising her right leg, Helene Bauer slammed the sole of her pump into the middle of his face.

It was as though he had been hit by an iron sledge. He was driven backward onto the asphalt while Helene Bauer kept hold of his right hand.

She released it just before his arm threatened to tear loose from his shoulder socket.

The back of Solo's head struck the asphalt cruelly hard. Pain danced behind his eyes. Helene's high heels tick-ticked as she walked towards him.

A car door slammed. Other feet hammered heavily. Solo struggled to pull himself erect. The spotlight swam overhead like a bleary eye.

Helene's voice, suddenly harsh and throaty, snapped an order in German. Solo's translating abilities were sorely impaired at the moment, but he managed to figure out that she was commanding someone to watch the alley entrance, to avoid being surprised.

Dazed, Solo tottered to his feet. Helene Bauer stood a yard away, her fists planted on her hips. No longer the slightest bit girlish, she regarded him with contempt. Ugly understanding began to seep into Solo's mind then. He thought of Herr Sunglasses at the New York airport, and of the rat-faced man in the Volkswagen. He said thickly:

"Illya was right after all. The herrings were herrings."

"You refer to the THRUSH agents whom you no doubt identified, Herr Solo?" Helene said. "The ones watching you and Kuryakin?"

"The agents I was *supposed* to identify," Solo cracked out. "While the real operator sneaked up on me from behind some perfume and a pretty dress."

"We did not know, of course, that it would work. Now that it has, my superiors will have to admit that I was correct. We knew your filthy local U.N.C.L.E. operative had accidentally sighted Herr Felix—" There was a strange, mystical fanaticism in the girl's voice as she pronounced Klaanger's first name—"and we disposed of your agent as quickly as we could.

"But we also knew that you and Mr. Kuryakin, or some other U.N.C.L.E. operatives, would be sniffing on the scent soon. I am proud to say that I was the one who suggested the little scheme which snared you. My superiors were not so certain the plan would work.

"When I saw you at the air terminal, I was exalted. Napoleon Solo had been selected for the assignment after all. And Napoleon Solo's weakness for women is notorious. While we kept you bemused with obvious THRUSH

agents pursuing you, I set the stage for this little finale. I trust it comes as a surprise."

"Well," Solo said, thinking of Illya, "somebody's going to say I told you so."

Helene Bauer smiled. It was a cruel smile. "No, Solo. You will not have the opportunity to hear those words. Your friend Mr. Kuryakin will never see you alive again."

And with that, Helene Bauer began to advance on him.

She threw aside her white stole. Her blue dress was sleeveless. For the first time, Napoleon Solo got a good look at her tanned arms. They were stronger and thicker than a woman's arms had a right to be. Not that they were unfeminine. They were smooth, firm, sun-browned. But underneath the skin, incredible muscles began to bunch and writhe.

"This is ridiculous," Solo said under his breath. "No ordinary girl can—"

Helene Bauer charged full tilt.

Solo whipped up his right fist, thrusting aside every mental reservation he'd ever had about smashing a woman on the jaw. Unfortunately his new attitude of expediency was of no use. Helene ducked under his guard and wrapped her arms around his waist.

Solo felt as though steel bands were constricting on his middle. The breath was squeezed out of his lungs. Helene picked him up with no effort at all and threw him six yards into the side of a parked Cadillac.

Solo hit the Cadillac's right door so forcefully that his head dented the metal. Pain blasted through his entire body as he slid down onto the asphalt. He braced his palms, tried to rise, upbraiding himself for this pitiful performance. After all, she was nothing but a girl—

Helene tapped him lightly under the chin with the toe of her right pump.

The contact resembled being run over by a diesel.

Injured both physically and in his ego, Solo lay on the asphalt, mumbling curses at himself. What was he, one of those ninety-seven pound weaklings?

It appeared so.

Helene Bauer was a female Klaanger. And marching up behind her, he saw blearily, were two incredible assistants, blond-haired, blue-eyed girls whose prettiness was marred by the inflexible, expressionless cast of their features.

Both girls wore short black leather jackets, skin-tight black ski pants and calf-high black leather boots. They were both at least six feet six inches tall.

Like storm troopers, the girls ranked themselves behind Helene, one to the right and one to the left. Solo wobbled up again. The three women regarded him with all the affection they might bestow on a lizard who had invaded their bedrooms.

One more try, Solo thought, doubling his bruised right hand.

"Inge?" Helene barked harshly. "*Schnell*!"

The girl on Helene's right darted forward. Solo rocketed his right hand out for what, in other circumstances, would have been a powerhouse punch. Inge had all the grace of a ballerina as she caught his wrist. She somehow snapped his entire person over her right hip, hurling him against the hubcap of a parked Chrysler.

"Are you persuaded, Solo?" Helene purred. "It is useless to resist."

Battered and bloody, he was beginning to believe it. Helene leaned down, picked him up and slung him over her shoulder. The girls marched to the silver Rolls-Royce, where Solo was dumped unceremoniously into the tonneau. Helene climbed in beside him.

Inge took the wheel. The second Amazon sat beside her, drawing a Luger which she aimed over the back of the seat directly at Napoleon Solo's forehead.

The Rolls motor hummed to life and the car swung back out the alley into the street, gathering speed. Helene got out a cigarette. Solo slumped against the leather. He was trying to gather his wits and not having much luck.

"Have you ever seen the *Schwarzwald*?" Helene inquired.

"The Black Forest? No. I don't think I'm going to like it."

"I assure you we shall do everything we can to make certain you don't. That is, before you die. What a dreary little man you are with your pretensions of strength! You don't know the meaning of strength. The joy of pure strength __"

Her fingers closed around the cigarette, crushing it to bits. She threw the remains on the floor of the car.

The Rolls sped on through Munich, heading in a direction Solo computed roughly as westward. He wondered whether the tiny transmitter concealed in the lining of his jacket was still functioning. If so, Illya would hear the signal begin to fade. He'd think Solo was smooching with this incredible, cruel-eyed superwoman who sat regarding him with such utter contempt—

At that moment Solo noticed a small pin on the collar of the leather jacket of the incredibly tall girl with the gun. The pin had a black border. In the center, on a white field, he saw the ugly configuration of a swastika.

"So we were right," he said. "The birds and the beasts have gotten together."

"Do you mean THRUSH and the Fourth Reich?" Helene asked. "You are correct. With one purpose." Her blue eyes flamed like illuminated diamonds, hard, cold. "To build an organization of such strength that the world cannot stand against us. We shall succeed."

The Rolls raced on out of the city. Trapped, Solo felt that Fraulein Helene Bauer just might be right about succeeding.

Because he, thus far, had failed.

ACT TWO — The Bigger They Come

ONE

A clock in the spire of the Lutheran church on the square chimed the hour of seven.

Sun spilled gold on to the sloping slate rooftops of the village of Ommenschnee. The gilt light painted the dun-colored cobbles of the square, where a stout farmer's cart drawn by a sway-backed horse was just clopping out of sight around the corner of an inn.

The windows of the inn were still tightly shuttered against the night.

Here a policeman wandered, there the driver of a milk lorry paused to pack his meerschaum with a cut plug before driving on with a puttering of exhaust.

Under the shadow of the porch arch of the great church, a smaller blob of shadow seemed to stir, as though about to venture forth among the few good souls who were beginning to move along the narrow streets of this hamlet deep in the pine-scented forest.

The shadow figure peering from behind a pillar at the picturesque square was an equally picturesque sight: a spindly, seedy peddler with a sack full of cheap imitations of Hummel figurines slung over his shoulder. He wore dark trousers, an ill-fitting coat which hung nearly to his knees and was nearly worn through at the elbows, and a battered old hat. The face of the itinerant peddler was the color of used leather, exceedingly lined. A white soup-handle mustache drooped below white eyebrows. But the man's eyes were alert, concerned—and young.

Finally this picturesque personage decided that he could cross the square in relative safety. The cobbles were filling with up-early pedestrians—several shopgirls; children riding bicycles; a couple of sporty youths on muttering

motor scooters; half a dozen nuns hurrying towards a chapel of another religious persuasion. Into this setting stepped the disguised Illya Kuryakin, his bag of figurines rattling.

With shuffling step Illya made for a street which angled west from the square's far side. He kept his head down so that the brim of his hat hid his face. He was beginning to feel his exhaustion. He hadn't slept at all the past night, and to compound the fatigue, he was nagged by an unproveable certainty that his whereabouts were known to THRUSH.

The biggest question was—did THRUSH now have his friend Napoleon Solo in captivity?

A warbling note barely perceptible to Illya's ears because the receiver was swaddled in thick layers of cloth under his coat seemed to indicate so.

Where was Solo being held? Apparently westward, in the green-boughed fastness of the Black Forest.

Early last night Illya had been rather lacksadasically perusing the isometrics pamphlet in the hotel suite in Munich. Solo had been gone for almost an hour. Illya had just about decided that no amount of finger-flexing and bicep-tensing would transform him into a strong man. He had been about to phone the hotel pantry for a snack and a good stein of dark beer when he became aware that the rod-like communicator lying there on the coffee table was emitting a signal which was growing steadily weaker.

The next twenty minutes were desperate.

Keeping the communicator pressed against his left ear so as not to lose the signal, Illya phoned a lesser official of the Munich U.N.C.L.E. station and rather high-handedly commandeered the station's expensive electronic detection and search sedan. The car took ten minutes to arrive at the hotel; the operator had had a minor brush with the law over speeding. By then Illya had nearly lost the signal from his pocket communicator.

With an emotion almost akin to frenzy, he practically knocked the operator out of the front seat of the dark, unobtrusive sedan and leaped in.

For the next ten minutes he drove round and round Munich's downtown, steering with one hand while he used his right to twist, turn the various knobs and rheostats on the complicated dash panel.

At last a greenish tear-drop blip appeared on the display glass in the center of the panel. The blip signal corresponded in its interval with the nearly imperceptible warbling still coming from his pocket communicator on the seat beside him.

There! Illya was locked on to Solo's transmitting frequency. But where was Solo going?

After ten more minutes of cruising, the glass showed him.

Either under coercion or of his own free will, Napoleon Solo was heading west. The blip inched steadily toward the left of the screen.

In the direction of the Schwarzwald! Illya hit the gas pedal and sent the sedan careening through the streets at the edge of the nightclub district. After another interval of high-speed driving, he had the blip again centered in the display glass.

He drove steadily now, his nerves fine tuned by tension. The blip was not outrunning him.

At three in the morning the blip abruptly disappeared from the glass. Illya computed its last position to be some three miles northwest of a village which the map called Ommenschnee. Illya parked the car on the shoulder of the highway, which at this point cut through giant trees that soughed into the darkness.

Illya hadn't seen another vehicle for an hour and a half.

Working by the feeble glow of the dash instruments, he rummaged in a trunk which had been loaded aboard the sedan at his request. A sour face indicated his attitude toward the seamy contents of the Munich station's so-called Emergency Disguise Kit.

He had his choice of imitating a police officer, dressing up as a non-denominational nun—what *were* the Munich people thinking, anyway?—or settling for some scrofulous-looking rags which were meant to cast him in a peddler's role, if he judged by the sack of figurines that completed the outfit.

Slipping into the noisome garb, Illya made a mental note to write a memo to Mr. Waverly concerning the witless choice of quick-change outfits offered by the Munich station. For an U.N.C.L.E. operative to be caught masquerading as an officer of the law or as a member of a non-existent holy order was abolutely idiotic. Inefficiency, inefficiency everywhere!

Illya pulled the floppy hat down on his head and paused in his mental tirade. He realized with some chagrin that he had just been hunting a scapegoat.

He was desperately afraid that through his own ineptitude his friend Solo had falled into the hands of THRUSH.

But perhaps Solo had only discovered a particularly warm tip, and was off to follow it. Illya reassured himself with this thought as he slid the ersatz walnut dashboard in place over the electronic dials in the car, and locked all doors. The detection and search sedan was constructed of the heaviest steels and equipped with bullet-proof glass. It would take a heavy tank with its cannon blasting to gain entrance.

Illya began to trudge down the shoulder of the road. Pine needles crunched faintly under foot. Suddenly headlights sprang up behind him, racing fast.

Illya's heart slugged wildly as he started for the protection of the trees. He was too late—

The headlights sprayed his back white. Illya hunched over, swung around, slitting his eyes and hoping that the facial stain and white mustache would serve to make him look old. Like white-yellow juggernauts the headlamps raced at him. He prepared to reach for his long-muzzled U.N.C.L.E. pistol beneath his rags of disguise. The vehicle was almost on him -

There was a plaintive moo in the peaceful night as the truck sang past on rapidly humming tires. Illya feigned a rapid, rheumy-eyed blink the moment it went by. IN the backwash of its lights he saw the heads and horns of cattle outlined fleetingly against the stars.

As the eager dairy farmer raced onward toward his destination, a few more soothing moos floated out behind. Illya's heart beat slowed down.

He had been certain that he too had been tagged by THRUSH. But this time it had been a false alarm.

Illya shambled ahead, making himself practice the enfeebled gait of an old man. The trees melted from solid darkness into relative individuality as false dawn, and then the real thing, lit the landscape. Illya's mind churned. Question after question tumbled through it.

What had happened to Napoleon? It was quite unlike his partner to depart suddenly on a fresh trail without telling him. Further, there was no sound at all from the pocket communicator now. This indicated that Napoleon was not attempting to contact him and, worse, was no longer even transmitting.

Had THRUSH already moved in for the kill? Only further trudging to the westward, toward the point in the Black Forest where the display screen blip had blacked out, would reveal the possible tragic answer.

Presently Illya crept into cover at the Lutheran church and surveyed the square at Ommenschnee. Now, having crossed the square, he was moving down a narrow street where the houses were old, gabled, and close together. A slatternly woman dumped a pail of slops out an upstairs window. Illya had to hop to it to keep from being drenched.

He brandished a fist at the woman by way of keeping in character but he didn't stop to argue. In minutes he had left the village behind and was trudging slowly down what appeared to be a dirt truck track.

It branched off the main highway leading from Ommenschnee at the village limits.

The highway swung roughly southwest. The track went due west, the direction Illya wanted to go.

He had walked perhaps five hundred yards along the track and had just poked his head warily around a bend when he got quite a surprise.

Parked up ahead was the same farmer's truck that had passed him several hours ago.

In the bed of the truck, half a dozen beeves jostled one another, gently discontented but no longer lowing. It was too late for Illya to turn back. The truck driver, a portly German with ruddy cheeks and a mustache fully as flowing as Illya's fake one, had seen him.

The driver was sitting against the truck's left rear tire, making a morning meal of a butt of bread and a quart of milk. Illya's trained mind sensed something awry, but he did not immediately know what.

Once again he swept his gaze across the truck. He couldn't locate the cause of his instinctive suspicion. Perhaps it was the driver himself. He was an immense man, Illya Kuryakin saw, as the latter stood up.

The driver wiped his none too clean sleeve across his lips, getting rid of a foam of milk. He towered at least halfway up to the seven foot mark, and bore a huge paunch out in front of him. He wore nondescript clothes. His black-haired arms were far too long to be called normally proportioned.

Carefully Illya adjusted his peddler's pack on his left shoulder. That way, his right hand would be unencumbered if he needed to get at the long-snouted pistol in the trick pocket of his shabby coat.

He put on a witless expression and shambled up to the beefy driver, whose fat cheeks were burgher-red but whose eyes were no warmer than glaciers.

"Lost your way, have you, *mein herr*?" said the dairyman in German.

"*Nein, nein*," Illya answered with an idle grin. His German was perfect enough to pass muster. "I am on my way to the village. Hermann is my name."

"The village," said the driver, "is back the other way." He pointed a porcine thumb.

Illya blinked several times. What was *wrong* here? Some detail was out of place. Something so obvious he should recognize it instantly. But light was bad in the forest; there were many shadows, pierced only at random by sunbeams. Illya heard a distant chatter start, somewhere far behind him.

"The other way? That can't be right," Illya complained, trying to sound elderly and irritable. "I saw no village—"

"Then your eyes are blind, old one." The farmer grabbed Illya's right shoulder. His fingers were thick. He applied far too much pressure for one casually interested in Illya's behaviour.

The beeves in the rear of the truck were responding to the man's angry voice. They began to stamp and swivel their heads so that their horns caught the light. They mooed loudly. All except one, which seemed to be standing stock-still and glass-eyed in the center.

Glass-eyed? Illya looked again.

The farmer spun him around bodily. Whirled in a complete circle, Illya had a flash-pan view of the hide of that stoical bovine that did not move. He would have sworn he detected something which distinctly resembled a moth-hole in its side—

"*Verdammt* old fool, be on your way!" The dairyman gave Illya a pop in the back of the spine that nearly knocked him off his feet. The man tried to sound hearty as he added, "It's for your own good. You'll merely become lost in the forest and die of hunger. I won't have your death on my hands."

Tottering and capering and wondering how much longer he should maintain this feeble fiction of being old, Illya plucked two handfuls of figurines from his sack and waved them at the dairyman.

"I don't know what a rude person like you is doing on this road," Illya piped. "But I have figurines to sell in the village. Clever little figurines, see? I intend to pass and go on my way—" Illya continued his tottering progress until he was back to within a yard of the dairyman.

The dairyman's cheeks grew plum-colored. He whipped a snub-barrel automatic from his side pocket.

"Your persistence is admirable," he barked. "But it is also your downfall—*Herr Illya Kuryakin*."

And with his free hand the dairyman knocked the hat off Illya's head, revealing the U.N.C.L.E. agent's youthful bowlcut locks.

Cold in his belly, Illya stood at bay, hands full of figurines, eyes watching the gun muzzle most carefully for the jerk which would signal a shot that could very well end his life. Behind him Illya heard the chatter-and-buzz growing louder in the sky. Without looking around, he knew a helicopter was skimming the tops of the trees.

"We suspected you would be coming, Kuryakin," the dairyman said. "Ever since we took your friend Herr Solo last night, we have been looking—"

"Is Napoleon alive?" Illya interrupted.

Like all Thrush men, this one relished cruelty. He shrugged. "I can't say."

"Where is he?"

"Where you almost got to, before I chopped you down to size."

The dairyman jerked his head to indicate the green-dappled forest depths behind him, to the west.

With surprising agility for a man of his stature, the THRUSH operative jumped up onto the rear fender of the truck and balanced himself, the gun muzzle never wavering from Illya's chest.

The agent reached with his free hand and caught hold of the left horn of the bovine which was standing statue-still in the center of the other animals. It was standing statue-still because it was dead and stuffed, as was revealed when the agent snapped off its left horn and pulled it toward him.

A cable ran from the center of the horn back into the animal's head. The agent said, "I would have taken you when I passed you earlier on the highway, but we preferred to lay the trap this side of Ommenschnee. It's quieter. Sometimes that highway is heavily trafficked before dawn."

The agent thumbed a yellow spot on the horn and the eyes of the phony beef began to blink brightly, first one, then another.

This electrical display somewhat upset the other animals. They began to moo plaintively once more. Into the point of the horn the agent said cheerfully, "*Achtung*, sky one. *Achtung*! Gerhard speaking. No need for you to land with our little friends. I have Kuryakin prisoner.

"The plan is working perfectly, isn't it? They've gotten Solo and now his chum has come running right after him. I shall drive him on in. He's showing no fight. Gerhard signing off—"

Illya flung both handfuls of figurines at the THRUSH agent and dove for the dirt.

The figurines smacked Gerhard in the face sufficiently hard to cause him to lose his balance. He fell from the fender, cursing. As he fell he managed to

twist and fire. Illya rolled desperately through the grass as the bullet whizzed by.

Gerhard hit the ground and shot twice more. Illya kept rolling, fighting to drag out his long-muzzled pistol as he rolled. Gerhard lumbered to his feet. He was standing now, had the right angle, could shoot downward at Illya, who was still scrabbling on the ground.

At the first shot, the animals in the truck had begun to moo more loudly, frightened. The electrified eyes of the false beef changed from white to red and flashed with a panicky speeded-up rhythm. The microphone on its cord had fallen over the side of the truck and had fallen down. From it crackled an anxious voice shooting questions in German.

On the ground Illya desperately tried to bring his right arm up in time to shoot. Gerhard had him centered in his sight.

The agent's cheeks worked puffily with hatred. Gerhard's index finger whitened on the trigger. Illya said a quick prayer—

From behind, Gerhard was stabbed in the neck by the tossing horns of a frantic steer lunging against the truck's staked side. Gerhard yowled. He stumbled off balance just as the gun exploded.

The shot winged past Illya's head by a fractional margin. His lips went white and he thumbed his weapon onto rapid-fire.

The gun's stuttering filled the sun-dappled roadside with thunder. Gerhard howled in rage, catapulting backward with holes in his belly.

He died as he hit the ground.

Panting, Illya whirled around. A shadow flickered over the roadway. The THRUSH helicopter was dropping fast, its rotors churning the air just above the treetops and lashing the leaves to a fury. Gerhard's sudden break in communication had alarmed the skyborne members of the trapping team.

Sunlight flared on the 'copter's cockpit glass and on two brighter circles within—the lenses of field glasses watching him.

Sprinting, Illya reached the truck and leaped inside. He flicked over the key, hit the accelerator and slammed the shift rod practically simultaneously. The truck leaped ahead.

He fought to control it. The cattle, maddened, were lurching back and forth like juggernauts in the rear. In the side mirror Illya glimpsed the helicopter setting down in the center of the dirt track. Men leaped out, armed with machine pistols.

A metallic chatter racketed up behind him. Then came a soft, plopping explosion. Another.

The slugs fired by the THRUSH agents had blown the rear tires.

The truck veered wildly, seesawing from side to side along the track. The machine pistols continued to burp and chatter. Bullets pinged and whanged into the truck body. Ahead, a large and adamant oak tree loomed. The truck raced straight into it, out of control.

Illya levered open the left hand door and leaped out. The dairy truck slammed into the tree with a huge crash. The cattle battered against the slatted sides of the truck, smashing through them at last. All the beeves leaped down, tumbling over themselves and stampeded away into the forest.

All, that is, except the electronic marvel. It remained steadfastly behind, missing one horn and its light-bulb eyes now blinking green with alarmed rapidity.

The gasoline tank of the truck let loose. The whole vehicle went up in a boom and blast of fire.

Heat seared Illya's cheeks where he lay on the ground, his right leg bent under him. Instinctively he averted his face, came up coughing in a cloud of

nauseous black smoke. The smoke screened his movements temporarily, allowed him to totter to his feet.

Abruptly his right leg went bad, jelly-like. He nearly fell.

He stumbled across a massive tree trunk, grimacing in pain. In the jump from the truck, he'd bunged up the leg. He started to hobble.

A new, terrifying sound split the morning air. Back along the road rose the frenzied yelping of dogs.

Illya lurched into a relatively shadowed area to one side of the dirt track. He risked a glance backward. What he saw chilled him clean through.

Down from the helicopter leaped three uniformed THRUSH officers in boots and gauntlets. Each man held a trio of leather leashes in his right hand. At the end of those leashes strained and slavered nine of the most murderous mastiffs Illya Kuryakin had ever seen.

The dogs yipped and bayed, eyes rolling, tongues lolling, vicious fangs dripping. The first officer released his leashes. The mastiffs shot ahead. The other six came right behind, a line of red maws and relentless teeth coming at Illya with rocket speed.

He lifted his long-muzzled pistol and squeezed off a shot. His vision was blurred from shock. He missed.

The dogs were halfway to the truck. Over the crackling of flames from the wrecked vehicle came the hoarse scream of the senior THRUSH officer:

"Kill!" he howled at his animals. "Kill, kill, *kill*!"

Sweat poured down Illya Kuryakin's forehead. He could never shoot all the dogs in time. He swung around and began to hobble through the forest. Pain beat unmercifully through his right leg.

Snap-and-yap, snarl-and-yelp, the dogs came on behind him. In seconds the chase assumed an eerie dream-like aura as Illya limped and dodged through sunshine and shadow-patches. He had no time to look around. The savage snapping of the killer jaws came closer. Closer—

A certain cold, emotionless professionalism swept over Illya then. Despite the pain and horror of the chase, he managed to pull out a small compass and hold it up in front of his eyes. The needle jiggled wildly, but its direction was still positive enough to show him that he was going the right way.

Well, he thought as he pelted ahead, this was the ultimate purpose for which he had been trained—to perish like a professional, not a dithering amateur.

Somewhere in the Black Forest to the west, Napoleon Solo was being held a prisoner.

At least, Illya said to himself, *when the dogs drag me down, I'll be right on course*.

TWO

The blip which indicated Napoleon Solo's position to Illya Kuryakin had disappeared in the darkest, bitterest hour of the night—three in the morning. At that hour, though Solo wasn't aware of it, his pocket transmitter had gone dead and caused the blip to vanish.

The reason was that Solo, riding in the Rolls with Helene Bauer at his side, had passed through a stone wall, as well as through a wall of electronic impulses which immediately nullified the effect of any spy or homing devices an interloper might be carrying.

The wall was high, its stone blocks huge and gray. As the Rolls swept up to it and braked, Solo saw two huge men in THRUSH uniforms step into the headlamp glare. Both had misshapen faces and the oversized shoulders and arms reminiscent of a Klaanger. They peered into the headlights in a dull-witted way.

"Get those gates open, you incompetents!" snarled the amazon at the wheel. "The *Herr Doktor's* daughter is here."

The guard offered feeble apologies: "I'm new. You didn't give the countersign—"

"You miserable wretch!" she cried in a temper. "We've been driving all night!"

She snatched the Luger from the hand of the girl beside her in the front seat and promptly fired a bullet into the guard's left thigh. The man fell, writhing and shrieking.

"There's the countersign," the girl declared airily, passing the gun back.

The other guard rushed into a control booth. Instantly, black iron gates swung open.

They were somewhere deep in the Black Forest, Solo knew. But he could tell little else, except that the stone wall was very high and thick.

The girl hummed as the Rolls eased forward.

A rustling of Helene Bauer's skirt as she shifted position caused Solo to glance around.

He'd been watching the tableau outside: one THRUSH guard kneeling beside his wounded comrade and directing ugly glances at the car's occupants as the Rolls picked up speed. Mentally Solo tabulated the information. So there was no great amount of love lost between the ex-Nazis and certain of the THRUSH personnel, eh? Perhaps that situation might somehow prove valuable.

Solo's nerves were wire-taut. His belly had a chill, empty feeling. But some of his nonchalance was returning.

He especially wanted to find out the exact nature of the union between these two fanatical power groups and, if possible, live long enough to at least communicate the facts to Illya—

That memory of Illya made him wonder about the tiny transmitter hidden in his jacket. Was it functioning? Certainly he couldn't rely on that -

Helene's skirt rustled. She had leaned forward to tap the Amazon driver on the shoulder.

"Inge," Helene said, "that shooting was unnecessary."

Inge half-turned. Her beautiful, stony profile was limned by the pale glow of the dash instruments.

"I am sorry," she said, so flatly it was clear that she meant just the opposite.

"You and your THRUSH pals certainly have a nice relationship," Solo smiled.

Helene spun around. "Be quiet! We work together very smoothly."

"At what? Demolishing each other? Well, I suppose you can't expect anything else when you make one bunch of paranoid killers the bedfellows of another. But then the problem becomes, which bunch is worse?"

Helene's lip quivered. For one moment Solo was not positive whether the girl intended to curse him or break into tears. He had probed and found a weakness. Helene's face froze into determined lines, but not before Solo saw a doubtful, hesitant look in her pretty eyes.

Was she as callous and as convinced of the rightness of her cause as she pretended to be? Or was there self-doubt, a deeply repressed feeling that she was in league with monsters?

Perhaps he was over-reacting to that fleeting, uncertain expression. But Helene would bear watching.

In a moment Helene had recovered and was as calm as ever:

"I don't care for your remarks, Solo. I would gladly turn you over to Inge for a bit of discipline if my father did not have another important use for your carcass."

The word *carcass* made Solo's spinal column crawl.

Inge laughed contemptuously:

"He wouldn't last five minutes with me, Fraulein Helene. He's obviously a weak, decadent type, unused to the outdoors and the joy of physical exercise. I would make liver sausage paste of his bones before he could scream twice. Of course I would be pleased to try—"

"I'll bet you would," Solo said.

Helene was sitting far forward on the seat, staring down the tunnel of the headlights. The Rolls was driving up a recently blacktopped drive. On either side of it Solo could see neatly cut and luxuriant turf.

"Sorry to disappoint you, Solo," Helene said. "My father really is in need of your body."

"What has your father got to do with this?"

Helene's smile was rather ghoulish. "In good time, Solo. In good time."

The Rolls slowed down, curving around a U-shaped drive past some formally clipped boxwood hedges. Then the headlamps swept past the corner of a great stone house. The vehicle braked.

Inge and her companion leaped out. Lugers glittered in their big fists.

A door slammed at the front of the house. No lights showed yet. The area around the car filled quickly with more THRUSH soldiers, all bearing sidearms at ready.

An officer touched his cap and held the door open for Helene. Solo got out after her.

"This way, please," Helene said, mounting a series of stone steps.

Solo followed. He was able to estimate the size of the house whose front staircase they were climbing—it was immense, towering up at least three floors and spreading out laterally in a series of equally large wings to his right and left. A spacious lawn of at least two acres spread out back there toward the gate. A spot of light in the guard booth indicated the great distance they had driven.

Helene had moved in beside him as they ascended the stairs, saying:

"This place is eight centuries old. It was an ancient baronial estate before it was acquired and refurbished for our needs. You shall see."

With this grotesquely cheerful warning, she led the way through huge bronze doors bearing rampant lions in bas relief. Inside Solo found himself in total darkness.

There was a motorized whirr. The giant doors shut with a ponderous chunk. Dazzling lights from a crystal chandelier sprung on.

Solo had thought quickly about making a play in the darkness. Things happened too fast. He had a vivid if fleeting impression of being in a spacious, marble-floored foyer with colorful tapestries on the walls. The foyer was tight as a box. All other doors leading out of it were shut. Solo and Helene were alone in the center of the floor, and before Solo half grasped all the details of the surroundings, the floor began to sink beneath them.

The walls remained where they were.

The tapestries and the chandelier rose away. When the marble floor had dropped perhaps twelve feet—down here the walls were cinder block, and set with recessed white lights behind frosted glass—two steel panels shot

out from the baseboards of the foyer above. The panels met in the center with a clang, immediately providing a new floor for the foyer and a ceiling for the shaft through which they were descending.

Helene fluffed her stole around her shoulders and continued to smile in icy satisfaction.

"I ought to go for your throat," he smiled back.

"Why don't you try, *Herr* Solo?"

"Because I'm curious about the rest of this rat's nest."

"Perfectly understandable. Although when you're shrieking in the final extremities of death I'm sure you'll rue your curiosity."

Solo waited with cold palms while the marble floor continued to descend past the recessed white lights. The air had an underground feel and smell, cool and redolent of earth. With a grind of gears the marble floor stopped. Double stainless steel pneumatic doors hissed back, revealing a corridor with similar metal walls.

A brunette girl in the black jacket and boot uniform was cleaning a murderous throwing knife with a soft cloth. She sat inside a booth with a wire front. Seeing Helene, she sprang up and raised her right hand in the old Nazi salute. The prettiness of her face was marred by the fanatic luster of her eyes as she cried:

"*Heil THRUSH*!"

The girl's boot heels clicked loudly. Helene lifted her right hand, though with somewhat less spirit. "*Heil*."

The girl in the booth eyed Solo like a slab of meat as she ran the ball of her thumb up and down the sharp edge of her knife. Like the others he'd seen, the girl stood well over six feet, and had unnaturally wide shoulders and long arms.

"Isn't that heil THRUSH routine pretty sticky?" Solo asked as he and Helene walked on. "Who is your leader, anyway?"

Helene said thinly, "We have but one leader. The spirit of *der Fuhrer*."

"How did you manage to hook up with THRUSH?"

"We had no formal, world-wide organization," Helene explained. "Here and there we had isolated cells, pockets of agents such as one in South America directed by General Klaanger. Certain approaches were made by THRUSH, inviting our participation in a joint effort. We accepted because THRUSH possessed the organizational structure by means of which we could return to our rightful place of leadership. We have been promised an elite position in the government which THRUSH will set up as soon as this current operation is successful."

The explanation was interrupted by the pneumatic hissing of another pair of doors at the corridor's end. Beyond, a hodgepodge of weird electronic equipment towered up at least two floors. A number of people were gathered in the vast chamber. Helene made a mock bow to indicate that Solo should go ahead. With considerable reluctance he did.

The conversation of the assembled group came to a halt. Heads turned. Smiles appeared, all of them gloating.

Solo stopped inside the double doors. They promptly shut and locked.

On a low balcony all around the cement-walled room, banks of computers blinked their lights and chattered their printouts, manned by THRUSH technicians in laboratory outfits. The other items of bizarre apparatus were ranged around the stone floor of the chamber, but the centerpiece was a kind of leather-padded operating table.

On each side of it a tapered stainless steel pipe was mounted in a drum-shaped concrete socket raised from the floor. These two pipes shot upward. At the point where they came together, a round stainless steel ball perhaps three feet in diameter hung between them. Something black and cylindrical,

resembling a lens mount, protruded from the lower surfaces of the ball, aimed at the leather-padded table below.

Nearby stood several control board consoles bolted to the concrete. All the switches, dials and light-indicators on the board were powered down, dark. The lab-coated THRUSH technicians presumably in charge of this nightmarish conglomeration of equipment formed the group which had fallen silent as Solo and Helene entered the room.

A small man in a rumpled coat broke free from the crowd and scuttled toward them. He was a strange, untidy figure, carrying a clipboard in one hand and an immense liverwurst sandwich on dark rye in the other. His rimless spectacles had quarter-inch lenses. He was as bald as an egg. He must have been well into his sixties, but he walked with a springy, nervous step, his eyes large as brown pingpong balls behind his glasses.

The little man gave Helene a peck on the cheek.

"My *liebchen*, my little girl! We have been waiting for you all night long!"

"We came as quickly as we could, Papa," Helene responded.

The little bald man scrutinized Solo. "This is the U.N.C.L.E. operative?"

"Yes, Papa. Napoleon Solo. One of their best men."

"He gave you no trouble?"

"Naturally not, Papa. We were far too strong."

"Yes, yes, isn't that the truth?" The little old man emitted a maniacal titter and immediately took an immense bite out of his liverwurst sandwich.

Solo didn't know whether to tremble or laugh. The little old man finished munching his bite of sandwich and threw the rest of the sandwich away carelessly over his shoulder. Then he subjected Solo to a withering gaze.

Solo could practically feel his shoulders, chest and biceps being found wanting.

"We have neglected the formalities, Herr Solo. My name is Doktor Klaus Bauer." Dr. Bauer marched back and forth in front of him. "Do you know why you are here, Solo?"

"I expect that it's because U.N.C.L.E. got curious about your little tea party, and I got a bit careless back in Munich."

Herr Doktor Bauer demonstrated how serious and formidable a foe he could be. He drew himself up to full height and cuffed Solo viciously across the cheeks, twice.

"Make sport of us at your peril, Herr Solo!" he warned. "At this experimental station we are forging the weapon which will bring U.N.C.L.E. to its knees, whimpering and cringing for mercy. Do you know who I am? Of course you don't! I have been forced to live in secret these past twenty years or face prosecution as a member of the Nazi party. That is a gross insult I will not willingly or lightly forgive—"

"And now that THRUSH has given you a chance to crawl out of the wormwood into the light of day, Herr Doktor—" Solo began.

"Be careful!" Helene said. "He is my papa, remember."

"I don't care if he's the reincarnation of Adolf himself; you're all mad as hoot owls."

Bauer squinted behind his rimless spectacles. "So you believe that. You simply dismiss us?"

Solo shrugged. "That depends on who operates this place. I know the capabilities of THRUSH. But I'm a little doubtful about the capabilities of a bunch of ex-storm troopers—"

"You have seen my capabilities!" Dr. Bauer shrilled. "You have seen General Klaanger, have you not? He was a weakling, a small, twisted weakling until I subjected him to my three-diode enzymatic physio-energizer—*there*."

With a slightly melodramatic gesture, Bauer indicated the sinister-looking table and the camera-lensed ball suspended above it.

"A mere courier, an errand boy such as you, Herr Solo, could not begin to comprehend the scientific principles behind the apparatus. Sufficient to say that by means of a process known to me alone—a process of ray bombardment which acts upon certain growth enzymes within the body—I am able to literally transform a human being into a superman.

"I can increase strength and size until a man is so powerful, no other human being can stand against him. Why, the process even renders a person less susceptible to death by such things as bullet wounds. Physical resistance to injury, the body's ability to fight off harmful accidents, is increased tremendously.

"Had I had enough money to implement my theories with this kind of equipment during World War II there would have been a different outcome. And, as it is, THRUSH has sought me out, financed my research and the construction of this equipment. In return, we of the Fourth Reich have joined forces with THRUSH to bring a speedy end to those governments which stand against us!"

In the silence which followed his harangue, a silence punctuated only by the deep, murmurous humming of a power plant somwhere beneath the chamber, Solo waited tensely, wondering what would happen next.

The THRUSH technicians had grouped themselves behind Dr. Bauer. They were watching the back of their leader's head with expressions testifying to their loyalty. One even applauded.

Suddenly, from directly behind Solo, a throaty feminine voice boomed out:

"He sounds as mad as a coot, doesn't he, Solo? But he isn't, you know."

Solo whipped around. A door had opened between two of the computers on the low balcony. At the balcony rail stood the woman who had spoken, a tall, splendidly-built girl with stunningly beautiful features and shoulder-length blonde hair.

She wore extremely tight-fitting tan trousers, a hugging sleeveless scarlet jersey and the black boots which seemed to be the hallmark of the shock troops around here.

With one lithe movement she climbed over the balcony rail. She jumped the short distance to the concrete. She walked toward them, swining a riding crop from her scarlet-nailed right hand. At her wide leather belt she wore a pistol in a holster. Her hair glinted with radiant highlights.

Solo would have allowed himself to be momentarily overcome by her truly statuesque beauty had he not gotten a glimpse of her slightly slanting green eyes.

That color tipped him off. He scanned his mental files, remembered.

"Vanessa Robin," he said. "The last time I heard about you, it was Ankara. You were THRUSH enforcement officer there." *And an infamous killer*, he added by way of a mental note. This did nothing to reassure him.

Vanessa Robin stalked up in front of him and peered down at the top of Solo's head. She stood seven feet tall, a beautiful, cold-eyed giantess.

"My," Solo said, "how little girls grow these days."

Vanessa laughed liltingly. "Then you really *do* remember."

"You were in the five-foot-six vicinity the last time I looked at your dossier."

"How sweet of you to recall! Even more sweet since we've never met!"

"I gather, dear, that Dr. Bauer has been tinkering with your enzymes?"

Vanessa Robin tickled the tip of his nose with her riding crop. "You have seen Klaanger, haven't you?"

"I've had that unpleasant pleasure."

"Then you must know that dear Dr. Bauer's process is a complete success. After all, look what it did for Felix. And for me. I was Dr. Bauer's first experiment, I am proud to say."

Vanessa actually sounded as though she was, which distressed Solo no end. Without that terrible fanatic light in her slanting green eyes, she would have been a highly desirable woman. But the power hunger in her eyes repelled him.

"I am equally proud," she continued, "that I was selected to supervise this station for THRUSH."

Solo could stifle a surprised *mmm*. "You're in charge here?"

"Completely. Here, my dear Mr. Solo, we shall forge the weapons that will destroy the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement and then allow THRUSH to achieve world domination. We have allied ourselves with these dreadfully single-minded Fourth Reich persons for one reason only—to gain Dr. Bauer's allegiance and his secrets."

Helene bristled. "You needn't be so cynical about it."

"Oh do shut up, Helene," Vanessa said. "You'll all get your sadistic little pieces of cake when the time comes. Solo, you'd be astonished to learn what we've had to promise all their people who are working for us. Positively dreadful things—" Vanessa pretended to be shocked.

"They have some ideas about what to do when we take over the leading governments of the world. Well, I can only say that their ideas of torture make the gas ovens of twenty years ago look humane. But we're all

cooperating. Our aim is to build a cadre of the toughest fighters that the world has ever seen.

"Very shortly plane-loads of THRUSH soldiers will be flown in and out of here around the clock. Each man in turn will be treated by Dr. Bauer's process.

"And from this dreary old baronial hall will march an army no other force of men in the world will be able to resist! Tireless. Incredibly strong. with positively frightening resistance to the sapping effects of wounds. I'm afraid U.N.C.L.E.'s time—and the world's—has run out at last."

Solo grimaced. "What am I supposed to do? Applaud before you shoot me?"

Vanessa Robin leaned down close. Solo caught a whiff of the raspberry scent of her bright scarlet lipstick.

Her slanting green eyes loomed above him.

"Dr. Bauer has a little experiment he wants to perform on you, Napoleon Solo."

"I don't think I'd make a good superman."

"Oh, not *that* kind of experiment."

Dr. Bauer clucked. "We have been seeking a special subject, Herr Solo."

"This particular experiment is new," Helene put in.

"And possibly extremely destructive to human tissue," Bauer said. "We are uncertain. Thus when Fraulein Robin informed me that agents of U.N.C.L.E. were in Munich, attempting to locate General Klaanger—"

"—who is here on the station, by the way," Vanessa told Solo. "He's simply dying to meet you face to face again." She tapped his forehead with her

riding crop, teasingly. Solo had to fight an urge to seize her throat and throttle her.

"Felix, the dear impetuous boy, wants us to turn you over to him. He's gotten so strong, he simply loves working over a—guest. But Herr Doktor Bauer needs your corpus much more urgently. This experiment is vital to his program. We don't want to risk one of our own people. So what more natural than to kill the proverbial two birds? We'll prevent you from telling your superiors about our hideaway and plan, and we'll do it by utilizing your person for this experiment."

Dr. Klaus Bauer was now almost literally capering from one foot to the other, dry-washing his hands in a frenzy of scientific eagerness:

"*Bitte*, can't we proceed—"

"I have two more things to tell Mr. Solo," Vanessa said. "One concerns his friend on this little mission."

Black anger blazed on Solo's face. "Illya? Where is he?"

"Be assured, he is under scrutiny and will soon join you here. If he lives long enough."

The situation had lost every last one of its comical overtones. No longer was Solo even faintly amused by the sight of little Dr. Bauer rolling his eyes behind his thick lenses while his palms went whisper-whisper as he dry-washed them rapidly.

Vanessa Robin, for all her grotesque increase in size since Solo had last studied her description in the files, was a top-flight THRUSH organizer, bright, utterly merciless and completely professional. The plan which she was carrying out here could be just the critical factor which would tip the balance against U.N.C.L.E. the final time.

With U.N.C.L.E. already stretched thin around the world, a sudden onslaught by THRUSH against key U.N.C.L.E. stations could be disastrous.

It could remove the last really strong defense which the free world had against the machinations of the supranation.

The road could lie open to complete THRUSH conquest.

Word had to be gotten back to Mr. Waverly somehow. A fleet of bomber planes on a quick sweep could wipe out this viper's nest in an hour, nullify the threat—

But how could that word be gotten back?

From the gleam in the THRUSH woman's green eyes, Napoleon Solo was dismally certain that she was telling the truth about Illya.

"One more thing before we begin," Vanessa whispered. Her lips were fragrant, hovering near his. "I have always heard that you were quite the romantic. I want to find out—"

Vanessa Robin closed her eyes for a kiss.

Before Solo could even respond, a murderous pain erupted in his groin. Vanessa had whipped up her right knee to slam him with agonizing force.

Solo reeled back, flailing and punching. The THRUSH technicians swarmed around him. Vanessa's mocking laughter pealed.

Solo stumbled, got off one powerhouse punch that broke the nose of a squealing technician before the others clambered all over him and bore him to the leather-padded table. They flung him out on his back and strapped him down. Vanessa was still laughing, tears of cruel humor running down her cheeks. Solo cursed, writhed—

Dr. Bauer's face loomed over him, as the scientists checked the bindings.

"What we wish to test, Herr Solo," he said, "is the *reversing* effects of my ray process. We wish to discover whether the process can also shrink a person's physical stature and reduce his strength. I must warn you that when

we conclude this little session, you may be a dwarf with the strength of a two-year old. Or the process may not work at all in reverse. You may simply be dead. Ah, but that's the scientific method, isn't it? Well, I believe everything is in order. *Achtung*!"

The commands which Dr. Bauer crackled out in German sent the technicians scuttling to the control board consoles. Solo heard switches being flipped, a powerful motorized whining begin somewhere.

A thick head strap cut across his forehead and ran down past his ears. He could not turn his head or move more than a fraction of an inch on the table, so tight were the bindings. All he could see, directly above, was an expanse of concrete and, nearer, the stainless steel ball suspended between the two slender poles.

In the center of the ball, the black lens-like device began to glow a strange metallic blue.

You may be a dwarf with the strength of a two-year old.

Or the process may not work at all in reverse.

You may simply be dead.

Dr. Bauer continued to call orders to the technicians. Solo heard switch after switch being thrown.

The metallic blue light in the lens far overhead pulsed brighter.

You may be a dwarf—

In dreadful fascination Solo watched the lens glow with a brilliant blue. Sweat poured off his forehead, turned his clothing sodden.

Without warning there was a low roar, a whining, and scarlet sparks shot across his field of vision. Then came smoke, more sparks, another flat explosion. Helene Bauer screamed.

ACT THREE — The Harder U.N.C.L.E. Falls

ONE

The yapping of the mastiffs grew louder and more ferocious behind him.

Illya Kuryakin was running with less and less speed every second. His right leg grew more painful with every step.

But how could he stop? Those nine savage animals were snarling and bounding along behind him, gaining fast.

Illya was growing dizzy from the exertion of the run. Every time his right foot smacked down against the carpet of needles and dead leaves on the forest floor, a burst of pain shot up into his skull and blurred his vision.

He breathed in huge, noisy gulps, heedless of the sound he made. At this critical moment, outrunning the animals was more important than keeping silent.

Outrunning? The idiocy of that approach finally penetrated Illya's mind.

For perhaps seven or eight minutes he had been blundering through the sun-dappled forest, hoping to escape the THRUSH canine pack. He had concentrated every effort, every thought on running at top speed despite the handicap of his leg. Now he was beginning to slow down through no fault of his own; and the mastiffs were catching up. He had to think up some alternate plan and quickly.

He rejected the notion of using the pistol which was still clutched in his right hand. The time required to turn and pick off the mastiffs one by one would be too long. Even if he shot one or two of the dogs, the others would charge the moment they heard the pistol-shots and probably attack him from a different angle within seconds.

Illya didn't care for the idea of digging in and standing fast, either. The dogs could surround him if he remained in one place for too long. He had to devise a way to strike once, effectively.

This whole thought process actually took place in Illya's mind in seconds, while he limped and lurched onward. The light in the forest was tricky. Patches of deep fir-scented gloom alternated with sudden brilliant glades where the sun managed to find its way downward through the boughs.

He had just crossed one of these glades and plunged into the shadows on the far side when he found what he hoped might be the solution—

Bursting through a row of trees on the far side of the glade, Illya nearly pitched into space. He dug in his heels and rocked to a stop, panting.

Directly in front of him the side of a gully sloped precipitously downward. It was a drop of about eight feet. At the bottom a gurgling stream meandered. What attracted Illya's notice was a large, dark opening in the wall of the gully opposite. It was some kind of animal's burrow, nearly four feet high and three feet wide at its opening.

Just behind this, an immense old deep-rooted oak thrust upward through the soil of the gully wall. One of the oak's lower branches hung out over the burrow entrance and the little stream.

The plan was desperate and even a trifle ridiculous because it was such a long, long shot. It sprang full-blown into his mind in an instant. He decided to trust his instinct and go ahead, provided he still had the one bit of armament he needed—

Desperately Illya shoved his pistol into the waistband of his trousers and dug his hand beneath his belt to the utility pocket where he carried a number of items such as lock-picks, a suicide capsule and a special communicator pack shaped like a half-sized cigarette pack. Gingerly and carefully he pulled out a small football-shaped pill.

The pill was a low-charge pressure-fused demolition device usually employed for creating a blast in a highly limited area. Such devices were valuable in blowing open a lock because the charge was concentrated. To fling such a pill back at the dog pack would have been useless; there was not enough scatter.

Buried in earth, though—Illya's eyes glittered hopefully as he charged down this side of the gully, staggered across the stream and crawled up to the entrance of the animal burrow.

Peering into that musty-smelling opening, Illya noted a pair of feral, red-gleaming animal eyes regarding him from far back in the dark. He heard a faint, rasping snarl.

A fox! What luck!

Carefully Illya bit down on the brown pill, holding it between his teeth as he stripped off the scrofulous knee-length coat and floppy hat which had been his costume of the day. He flung these rags into the animal's den. Then he clambered up the gully-side and leaped high. He caught hold of the thick, swaying tree branch which overhung the gully wall.

His right leg throbbed. He managed to swing it up and stretch himself precariously upon the branch, which swayed like a hammock under his weight.

Across the gully, the first of the mastiffs bounded from the trees, tongue lolling, savage eyes sweeping the scene before it. The other dogs appeared almost at once. Their smooth coats shone in the dim sunlight. Their teeth gleamed like white needles.

The dogs stopped yapping. One scratched his way down the gully-side and padded across the creek, sniffing and whining. Far back in the forest there were shouts, the crashing of boots. Time was precious. The THRUSH agents would be here in a matter of moments.

The mastiffs seemed confused. They were all sniffing up and down the gully bank. The dog that had crossed the creek was growling and advancing with a twitching muzzle toward the dark circle of the burrow.

"That's it," Illya breathed. "Don't look up."

The limb upon which Illya was hanging gave a faint, horrendous crack.

Illya hung on tightly as the limb sagged perhaps a foot. There came another splintery sound. More wood gave way.

Illya wished he were sixty pounds lighter. There was nothing to be done about that now. He was hanging barely six feet above the head of the curious mastiff, absolutely immobile.

The dogs would know Illya was somewhere nearby; scent would tell them so. But he had thrown them off by pitching his clothes into the burrow. If this accursed limb only held up long enough—

With a ferocious yelp, the mastiff just below shot his muzzle into the burrow, growling savagely. Then, as though jerked by a collar-tether, the mastiff totally disappeared inside.

Illya waited for the next act in the naturalistic drama. It was not long in coming.

A yip, a sound of earth being violently disturbed, the angry barkings and snarlings of more than one animal all indicated that mastiff and fox had met.

Hearing this call to arms, the rest of the dogs shot into action. They barked and charged across the creek, and for a moment there was a considerable traffic-jam at the narrow entrance as the mastiffs all tried to squeeze inside to aid their comrade.

The last of the mastiffs finally squirmed into the burrow, from which issued the most frightful sounds of animal ill-temper Illya Kuryakin had ever

heard. He wasted no time. He pinched the brown capsule with his thumbnail to activate the pressure-fused trigger device and dropped the capsule straight down into the dirt a foot above the burrow entrance.

Suddenly a reddish projectile shot from the burrow and landed with a splash in the creek. The earth at the burrow mouth erupted in a low, smacking explosion. A cloud of white billowed, followed by a shockwave sufficient to shear off the limb where Illya hung.

Illya flailed in space and landed on all fours in the creek, sopping wet. From a flat rock a foot away a red fox regarded him with alarm. Apparently, figuring that there had been enough surprises for one morning, the fox bounded away into the forest.

TWO

Breathing hard, Illya picked himself up. The explosion had sealed the burrow. Wisps of smoke curled into the air; frantic barking seemed to rise from the very ground. It would give Illya the slight advantage he needed, even though Illya could still hear the THRUSH agents clattering along in the woods, getting closer.

He fought his way up the bank beside the sealed-up burrow and slipped into the forest.

The THRUSH agents would have quite a time figuring out how nine of their killer dogs had gotten sealed inside a hole in the ground which contained no U.N.C.L.E. agents.

By the time they dug the mastiffs out, Illya trusted that he would be safely hidden away somewhere. This was his immediate goal as he glided through the trees, making as little noise as possible.

His right leg still pulsed hellishly. He knew he would have to hole up soon, not only to wait for covering darkness, but to rest.

After having covered about two miles with no immediate evidence of pursuit, Illya discovered another huge oak which would offer him sufficient shelter. He dragged himself up to the second fork, folded his body awkwardly into a not-quite-comfortable position and settled down to listen.

Far off he heard barking. This gradually died away. The sun rose higher. Illya dozed.

He woke as the shadows of afternoon were lengthening. He heard a party of men passing somewhere, the renewed snarling and snapping of dogs.

He lay still as a stone among the rustling leaves.

By turning his head just a fraction he was able to catch a glimpse of the searchers—fully-armed THRUSH troopers. THis time the two mastiffs which they had with them were leashed. Such was the reward for dogs who failed.

Several tense moments passed before the search party disappeared. Evidently Illya's trail had grown cold. The forest fell silent again, save for the occasional twitter of a bird or the chirp of an insect.

The pain in Illya's right leg had begun to diminish a little. He was incredibly hungry. Satisfying the inner man would have to wait, though. He had to take up his westward course again, and try to locate Napoleon.

Wasting nearly an entire day eluding the THRUSH pursuers did not exactly put Illya in high spirits. There was no telling what had happened to Napoleon during that time.

But there was nothing to be done about it. He wouldn't have gotten this far if he hadn't holed up in the tree to avoid discovery.

At sunset Illya climbed down. He walked cautiously, shivering in the night's coolness.

About an hour later, Illya nearly stumbled across a light beam running between two photo-cells set facing one another in two large tree trunks. His pulses quickened. He bellied down. Carefully he slid beneath the photo-beam and jumped up on the other side.

Warning devices built into tree trunks meant that he was nearly to the target.

Pressing on, Illya thought for the first time since the preceding night about the girl with whom Napoleon had had a date. What was her name? Helen? No, Helene. A German last name. Bauer, that was it. Was she too a prisoner of the unspeakable minions of THRUSH? That would teach her to listen to Napoleon's sweet nothings.

The cynical thought did nothing to cheer him up. As he crept on through the forest suffused with blood-colored sunset light, he still had the depressing conviction that he might be much too late to save his friend.

Presently he heard a sound. It happened only seconds before his keen eyes picked out something ahead which resembled a high stone wall.

Illya advanced to a large tree by the wall. Looking to the left, he saw by the feeble light of evening a large gate guarded by a pair of oversized THRUSH troopers lounging near a booth. This, he realized with a tightening of his nerves, was the place.

THREE

The sound which assaulted his ears took on definition. Voices, many of them, sharp and in unison. The voices chanted some kind of cadence count.

Then Illya recognized the language.

German.

"*Ein. Zwei. Drei! Vier! Ein! Zwei! Drei! Vier!*"

What made the chant chilling was the savage way the syllables were shouted out. The voices from the other side of the high wall belonged to women.

Drawing back into the trees, he began to work his way around to the right. He was sure the wall itself would be rigged with anti-personnel devices. He decided that he would make a complete circle of the wall to judge its length. Then, if no other means of entrance presented itself, he would make an attempt on the front gate, risky as it might be.

In moments Illya reached the corner of the wall. He peered down the side of the square which ran westward, at a right angle to the front expanse. Trees completely ringed the property, affording him cover as he worked along all the way to the wall's rear corner. There he paused once more to reconnoiter.

The cadence-count had grown much louder. Whatever the women were doing, they were doing it near this rear part of the grounds. A kind of postern gate appeared to be set in the back wall about half way along. A THRUSH soldier walked up and down laconically, a machine pistol slung over his shoulder.

Illya's nerves tightened another notch. He crept along through the underbrush until he was opposite the postern gate, an ancient metal affair with new hinges and polished locking mechanism.

Carefully Illya palmed his long-muzzled pistol, giving one screw to the barrel to snap the silencing baffles in place. He set another control on the butt to feed the proper projectiles to the chamber. Then, with his left hand, he picked up a small stone and lobbed it high against the wall, to the left of where the THRUSH minion was examining his knuckles in a preoccupied way.

The pebble struck. The guard whipped around toward it. Illya lunged from the trees. He dropped to one knee and carefully pulled the trigger.

With a pop the pistol jerked in Illya's hand. The THRUSH guard opened his mouth to scream, slapped his neck. His eyes turned milky as the serum on

the tranquilizing dart raced to his brain. Giving a feeble murmur, the guard folded to the ground, out for twelve hours.

Quickly Illya dragged the man into the trees. He yanked off the THRUSH uniform and hastily donned the oversized blouse and trousers. Next he stuffed some leaves in the crown of the too-large visored cap so that it wouldn't slip down over his ears.

He approached the metal postern gate, rapping it smartly with the butt of his pistol and stepping to the right when the bolt rattled. The door opened from inside.

"*Ein! Zwei! Drei! Vier! Ein! Zwei! Drei! Vier—*"

The massed female voices continued to shout out the cadence beyond the wall. IN the crack of the postern door, a misshapen face loomed. The THRUSH soldier looking out was another of those grotesque, slab-shouldered types. Illya jammed the pistol muzzle against the man's neck and triggered once.

Like a bull the man reared backward, reaching for a red-painted lever affixed to a klaxon. His eyes were already glazed but he was falling in such a way that if his hand missed the lever, his body would fall across it. Illya dived forward frantically and shoved the THRUSH man aside.

The guard went down with a groan, fingertips missing the klaxon lever by a matter of an inch.

The THRUSH man thudded onto the wooden floor of a little guard booth which was built against the high wall directly inside the massive postern door.

Illya slammed and bolted the door and then examined his surroundings more carefully.

The booth was constructed of steel. There was a window wicket in the door, which led from the booth to a floodlit parade ground outside.

On this parade ground, three dozen incredibly tall and attractive young women, all in black jumpers, trousers and boots, were lined up doing calisthenics as the white glare of the floodlights poured down upon them in the twilight.

Beyond the parade ground towered what appeared to be an ancient baronial hall with several sprawling wings. Many of its windows were alight.

With a final lusty "*Vier!*" the exercises came to a halt. The ranks of superbly-muscled young women drew up to stiff attention. In front of them another girl with an electric megaphone was cracking out instructions in German. Illya couldn't quite see all of the girl's face, but something about it was hauntingly familiar.

As soon as the girl in command finished her harangue, the amazons drew themselves up even more stiffly, shot their right arms into the air palm outward and cried:

"*Heil THRUSH!*"

Illya's belly turned over with nausea. He had certainly come to the right place.

In twos and threes the girls broke ranks and moved toward the great baronial house. None dawdled. They moved out with long, determined strides.

Now the instructress, likewise clad entirely in black, with a wide black leather belt around her waist, was moving in the direction of the wall. Evidently she intended to stow the electric megaphone in a kind of hut or equipment locker built against the wall to Illya's left. At last Illya recognized the blonde tresses, the pretty whipped-cream face—

The last time he had seen that face, the girl had been serving refreshments aboard an Air Deutschland jet.

Illya hefted his pistol and, keeping his head down, opened the inner door of the booth. He closed it smartly and began walking along a path of stones toward the equipment shed, on a course which would intersect the girl's.

All of the girls had now departed from the floodlit field. The sky above was black. The first stars were glittering. But he and the girl were bathed in the blue-white glare of the spots.

Quickly Illya transferred his weapon to his left hand, the one nearest the wall, in case any watch-stations up at the big house had them under surveillance. The girl had reached the hut. She opened its door to stow her megaphone inside. She glanced at him once and then glanced away, assuming him to be just another guard on some errand or other. Illya moved close enough to call out softly:

"Good evening, Fraulein Bauer."

Her head whipped up. Her blue eyes narrowed and fire shone out. Illya remained standing right where he was, pistol angled up alongside his left thigh so that it pointed at her bosom.

"Kuryakin!" Helene Bauer's fingers dropped toward a knife sheath at her belt.

"Leave the knife where it is, please," Illya said, keeping a smile pasted on his face in the unlikely event they were being surveyed through field-glasses.

Helene's fingers tensed just inches from the knife hilt. Indecision and fear shone on her face as she hesitated.

"If you are thinking about raising an alarm," Illya said, strolling forward at an easy pace, his teeth bared in that fake grin but his voice deadly quiet, "I would advise against it. Perhaps your comrades could reach us and capture or kill me. But before they did, I assure you I would disregard your sex and shoot you."

The girl hesitated only a moment longer. Her shoulders slumped. "All right."

"I thought I might find you a prisoner, Fraulein. Apparently, however, you are one of the clutchers. I don't know what pretty plots you're hatching at this school for savage-looking female storm troopers—"

"Let them get their hands on you, Kuryakin, and you'll discover you don't know the meaning of the word savage!"

He said, "Mustn't lose your temper just because I'm one up."

"For the moment. Only for the moment."

"No," Illya corrected, his face no longer friendly. "For as long as you wish to remain alive, Fraulein Bauer. I will not hesitate because you are a woman. U.N.C.L.E. does train us rather thoroughly in such matters, you know. Now—is Napoleon Solo here?"

Helene Bauer bit her lip. She glanced away, as though searching for help. The parade ground stretched empty and flood-lit. The girl seemed unable to make up her mind as to whether Illya's threats were serious.

To reinforce his psychological advantage, he thumbed a stud on the pistol-butt. An ominous ticking began. He said lightly:

"I have just set my pistol on automatic timed discharge, Fraulein. If you have not answered my question at the end of sixty seconds, the gun will begin firing straight at you. To repeat—is Napoleon Solo here?"

The ticking continued steadily. A nightbird cried in the forest.

Tickticktick—

Suddenly the girl wilted, shielding her eyes with her right hand. "Turn it off."

"Not until you answer me."

"He's here." She whipped her hand down, her face a changing pattern of fear, doubt, anxiety. "But what time is it? She glanced at a small stainless steel watch on her wrist. "Ten past seven already. He may no longer be alive."

Illya flicked off off the stud. The pistol ceased its relentless tick.

"What does the time have to do with Napoleon Solo being alive or dead?"

"My father Dr. Bauer is in charge of the scientific project at this station. By means of his enzymatic ray process he is increasing the strength and physical capabilities of a select group of THRUSH shock troops so that—"

"Yes, yes," Illya said impatiently. "We saw Klaanger. Get to the point. Where is Napoleon?"

"In my father's laboratory. There."

Helene indicated the sprawling building. Rapidly she explained the experiment which Dr. Bauer had been intending to perform.

"Solo went under the reversing ray early this morning when I first brought him from Munich. But just as the equipment was turned on, a transmitter overloaded and blew out. Technicians had to work in the lab all day to make the proper repairs. Your Mr. Solo gained a slight reprieve. He has been locked in a cell all day today. My father re-scheduled the experiment for seven this evening."

Illya's heart began to slug faster in his chest. "Then we have no time to lose."

"I can't help it if it's already too late, Kuryakin."

"For your sake, my dear," Illya replied, "I hope it is not. No quickly. Fall into place beside me. Here, on my left side. We are going to walk side-by-side across the parade ground and into your headquarters. You will take me

directly to the laboratory. I will have my pistol pointed at your pretty ribs every second. I will fire at the first outcry. Are you ready?"

Looking rather scared for a superwoman, Helene Bauer nodded.

Illya felt perspiration trickling down the back of his neck. The parade ground was huge, giving him a feeling of isolation, of being a clear target. Helene Bauer's sibilant breathing sounded loudly in his left ear.

It seemed to be taking forever to reach the house.

"Walk faster," he whispered.

Helene quickened her stride. They passed a number of dun-gray halftrack vehicles with machine guns mounted on swivels in their rear beds. They reached a concrete walk which led to a rear entrance to the house.

Under a feeble shielded light a THRUSH soldier snapped to attention.

Illya's mind raced. Was Solo alive? Or was the hour already too late?

Illya held the door. They stepped into a foyer walled in stainless steel. His heart hammered in his chest. The first peril was past.

But how many more lay ahead?

FOUR

Napoleon Solo had the eerie feeling that he had been here before. And indeed he had been, for he was again strapped down to Herr Doktor Klaus Bauer's thickly padded table.

More than twelve hours had passed since Bauer's assistants manhandled him onto the table. He was no closer now to a way of escape from this devil's den of goose-steppers and THRUSH agents than he had been then. If anything, he was further away.

"Patience, patience, Solo," Bauer said as he came within Solo's range of vision, bustling from one control console to another. "Don't writhe so. It's useless."

Bauer paused long enough to peer down at Solo. His eyes rolled behind his rimless glasses. His round pate shone like a new egg under the fluorescent glare of the ceiling lights. A thin film of spittle appeared on his up-curled lip as he contemplated his victim.

Solo was now clad in loose, over-starched gray prison trousers and shirt, black socks and clumsy ankle-high prisoner's boots.

As Bauer's face swam close, Solo realized again that the man, though brilliant, was certainly unbalanced. He recalled Bauer's almost womanish sobs this morning, when the transmitter had overloaded and blown out, thus granting Solo his brief reprieve.

"I trust the day-long wait has not aggravated your nerves, Solo?" Bauer clucked.

"Not much," Solo barked back. Cold perspiration trickled down his right cheek. In truth the day of anticipation had done just that, tightened his nerves almost unbearably.

After being removed from the table that morning in the smoke and confusion following the power failure, Solo had been stripped, searched—a formality neglected on his arrival, due to Bauer's extreme haste—and then given his prisoner's garb. He was thrown into a cheerless, windowless cement cell. There, without a weapon or, seemingly, a prayer of getting out, he had languished throughout the day until THRUSH soldiers fetched him at ten before seven this evening.

"We won't have to wait much longer now," Bauer grinned.

"There's no need to fake a lot of civilized behaviour, Herr Doktor. I know you too well."

Bauer's eyebrows shot up. "But this is nothing personal, Herr Solo!"

"Maybe with you it's not."

"This is all in the cause of science!"

"Or the cause of a little Bavarian madman who butchered women and children?"

Dr. Bauer's face lost its comic-opera look. He leaned down and very nearly spat in Napoleon Solo's face.

"For that filthy remark, I hope the process reduces you to a boneless, witless lump of—" He lapsed into a stream of vile German words.

One of his assistants tugged his sleeve, nervously indicating the clock high up on the wall. Bauer flushed and recovered himself. With a last hateful glance at Solo he rushed off.

Click-*click*.

Snap-*snick*.

The deep hummings began.

Overhead, the black lens in the center of the stainless steel ball glowed and pulsed, glowed and pulsed -

"Power drain, Hermann?" Bauer called somewhere.

"Normal, Herr Doktor."

"Splendid, splendid! Throw the lever. Increase to the third increment—"

A low metal *spang* indicated that the lever had been thrown over. Solo's extremities began to tingle oddly. The pulsing blue halation which surrounded the steel ball hurt his eyes. This was unforgivable! He shouldn't

be trapped this way, giving up his life without even having had the chance to notify U.N.C.L.E.. If only Illya had somehow gotten through—

"Increase to the fifth increment!" Dr. Bauer called above the rising dynamo hum.

The bluish light began to make Solo's eyes dance with painful colored dots. His entire body gave a violent spasm, as though some strange transformation were taking place within his cellular structure. A second spasm followed. He would have fallen off the table and been injured had not the restraining straps been so tight.

Solo clenched his teeth. Another peculiar pain started, this one seeming to come from the deepest marrow of his bones. He bit down on his lower lip to choke back a cry of agony as the bluish light blazed, *blazed*—

Sensations smacked against his eyes and ears in confusing, overlapping sequence:

A heavy metal door hissed and rocked open with a clang.

At the same time a girl squeaked out a frightened yell which ended with a sudden gasp of breath, as though her warning cry had been aborted by a quick, ungentlemanly punch in the ribs.

Then, through a chorus of German cursing, Solo heard a voice he recognized:

"Napoleon? Napoleon—"

"Illya!" Solo was unable to twist his head and see his friend.

"I will kill anyone in this chamber who moves," Illya called.

The bluish light blinded Solo. Even the stainless steel ball directly above him was hidden. The ache in the marrow of his bones intensified to a point

of near-unbearable agony. Somehow he managed to summon strength to yell in a croaking voice:

"Illya? Make them—turn the machine off."

"Turn it off," Illya ordered.

"*Nein, nein!*" Bauer exclaimed hoarsely. "Manfred, throw the alarm switch —"

Footsteps hammered. Illya shouted another warning. Evidently it was disobeyed. Illya's pistol cracked flatly once. A man screamed.

As Solo remembered, there were no THRUSH soldiers stationed in the laboratory chamber, only research men. Evidently Illya had them under the gun and they were not of a mind to disobey his orders. Silence fell.

But Bauer wasn't happy with the situation.

"Do not touch the power-down control, Wolfgang! If you value your life, do not—"

"Wolfgang—" Illya said harshly.

Wolfgang apparently had a different view of his life's worth. There came the solid ka-*thunk* of a large control being slammed home. At once the power hum of the dynamo receded. The bluish light began to fade.

The marrow-hurting pain in Solo's bones waned. In a moment, after a flurry of footfalls, Illya's face appeared just above his, white, anxious. A knife blade flickered. Illya slashed at the straps. Seconds later Solo sat up and stretched his creaking muscles.

He wasted no words of thanks. They were in a serious situation and he had to move fast. Solo's eyes swept the chamber.

Dr. Bauer and his technicians were grouped around the control-board consoles, tense with fear. On the low balcony other THRUSH lab men had

frozen by their instruments.

Near wide open double doors leading to a stainless steel corridor, Helene Bauer was just picking herself up. She shook her head groggily.

"I am not quite certain as to what is happening here, Napoleon," Illya whispered.

Dr. Bauer stared hatefully at the pistol in Illya's fist. "You can't escape."

"That remains to be seen, sir." From the corner of his mouth, Illya hissed at his friend, "I had to hit the girl when she screamed. If we reach her before she recovers, we can use her as I used her to get in here—for cover."

Solo nodded. He pointed overhead at the stainless steel ball. "First we've got to wreck that thing. It's Bauer's ray for making supermen—"

Illya grasped the situation instantly. He raised the pistol over his head. "Watch them, Napoleon. Here's my knife. Take it." With his gun turned toward the stainless steel ball he squinted up the muzzle over the sight—

Klaus Bauer let out another hysterical scream of rage and flung himself forward. Solo darted in to block the man's charge with his body so that Illya could get off his shot.

The shot never came.

Something flickered in the corner of Solo's eye. Bauer crashed into him, flailing and digging at Solo's face with savage fingernails. Illya heard noises, whirled around, precisely at the instant when an entire section of concrete block wall on the balcony shot upward to reveal Vanessa Robin and Felix Klaanger charging down a slanting corridor into the chamber with THRUSH troops pounding at their heels.

ACT FOUR — Pick a Rock, Any Rock—Or Die

ONE

Vanessa Robin's slanted green eyes were raging as she flung up a rapid-fire pistol and began to blaze away. Solo and Illya threw themselves to the concrete. Streaks of white fire ate towards them, chewing holes in the padding of the big table.

"Crawl toward the right," Solo said. "They'll fan out all around us in a couple of seconds. We'll be caught if we don't reach that door soon—"

Illya nodded, cheeks chalk-white as he took aim and fired. A THRUSH soldier climbing down over the balcony rail jerked his arms straight up in the air and toppled. Blood sprouted from a bullet hole in the side of his neck.

"Deploy, deploy!" Felix Klaanger bawled, gesturing with a rifle. "Encircle them, you idiots!"

Klaanger was crouching behind a concrete support post at the balcony's edge. Vanessa was right beside him. Her face was vengeful, but Klaanger's was even worse, a nightmare face with its gigantic wreck of a nose. Illya scrambled to his feet alongside Solo and tried a shot. Klaanger's bulbous, lemon-shaped head disappeared, unscathed.

The entire laboratory was now a pandemonium of shots, curses in German, shrieked orders and counter-orders. Solo and Illya raced full-tilt for the doors through which Helene Bauer had led Illya only moments ago. Helene too was crouching on the balcony, seeking cover from the deadly crossfire. The U.N.C.L.E. agents zigzagged through the maze of control consoles, ducking, bending, twisting—

Solo felt a slug pluck his left sleeve. Another chunked against Illya's flying left heel, dug out a section and spent itself on the concrete floor. They were

five yards from the balcony and the doors.

Three yards.

Two -

Just ahead, Dr. Klaus Bauer loomed up. Somehow he had gotten around in front of them. Shrieking wildly, he launched himself from the balcony rail and landed on top of Napoleon, knocking him to the ground.

Over and over they tumbled. The scientist had gone berserk. His nails dug and clawed at Solo's neck. His knee slammed violently into Solo's groin, bringing intense pain. Solo lost all his scruples about hurting an older man and gave Bauer a wild bashing elbow in the mid-section.

Bauer's glasses slipped off and he groaned. But he managed to hang on to Solo's throat as Solo staggered to his feet, literally dragging Bauer along with him.

Illya had leaped up to the balcony rail, was hanging there by one hand. He sniped at the THRUSH soldiers who were creeping forward behind cover of the various consoles.

Violently Solo twisted, trying to shake Bauer off. For brief seconds, the white-coated back of Dr. Klaus Bauer was turned toward the center of the chamber. A rapid-fire pistol stuttered.

Dr. Bauer began to jiggle and sway like a marionette. Inches from Solo's face, his mouth sagged open. The light of life dimmed in his eyes. His hands slipped free of Solo's throat. Slowly, he corkscrewed to the floor. The back of the little man's lab coat was singed black, and stitched back and forth with a pattern of holes left by high-powered bullets.

On the far side of the chamber Vanessa Robin leaned on the top of the concrete support post. Smoke curled from the barrel of the rapid-fire pistol in her right hand.

Solo quickly became conscious of two things: the totally callous and inhuman way Vanessa Robin had murdered Bauer to get at him, and a sound behind and to his left—low feminine sobbing.

And then a hysterical scream tore out:

"Papa! Dear God—Papa!"

Helene Bauer plunged down off the railing and crawled along until she had her dead father's head in her lap. Tears streamed down her cheeks. She cried to Vanessa, "Why did you murder him? He was on your side!"

Voice colder than cold, Vanessa called back, "It's Solo and Kuryakin we want. Your father lost his senses. He got in the way. Besides we didn't need him any longer. He had done most of his work, after all."

Helene Bauer's face filled with hatred for a moment. Then her shoulders convulsed with sobs. She bent over her father's mutilated corpse, swaying back and forth.

All this took place in a matter of seconds. Napoleon Solo realized abruptly that the THRUSH soldiers were still creeping forward, rifles glinting as they scurried from machine to machine. He had the unpleasant feeling that Vanessa Robin had already issued orders that he and Illya were not to be killed.

He whirled, jumped, caught the top of the balcony rail, pulled himself up—

And found himself looking down the barrel of an automatic rifle held in the misshapen hands of a THRUSH soldier.

While Solo had struggled with Bauer, other THRUSH soldiers had rushed into the stainless steel corridor which had been their hoped-for escape route. These soldiers jammed the balcony now. Two had overpowered Illya from behind. One had a murderous elbow crooked around Illya's throat. The other held a rifle against his side.

Illya Kuryakin was disarmed, caught, his face a mask of disgust.

Solo stayed right where he was, breathing sibilantly. His first sudden movement would bring a THRUSH bullet crashing into his body.

The soldiers fanned out around him as Vanessa Robin broke from cover on the far balcony and raced across the floor of the laboratory. In a moment they were face to face:

"You very nearly made it, didn't you, Solo?" Her cheeks were mottled red as she towered over him, staring down furiously.

"Next time we will," Solo said, with considerable false bravado.

Vanessa shook her head. Her shoulder-length blonde hair glittered with cold highlights. "No next time for you or for Kuryakin. You have caused us quite enough trouble already. As station chief I am authorizing your execution."

Felix Klaanger, resplendent in a THRUSH officer's uniform with black and red epaulets, had lumbered up behind her. His grotesque face shone with sadistic joy as he said, "Allow me the pleasure, Fraulein Robin." He cracked the knuckles of his right hand, a loud, popping sound. "Allow me to dispatch them."

Vanessa pondered. "No, General, I think not."

Klaanger's face became, if possible, even more ugly. "I demand that you—"

Vanessa Robin slapped him smartly across the nose. Klaanger howled.

"That's the trouble with you, Klaanger. You always *demand*. Every time you want something, you *demand*. This is not the headquarters of the German High Command. This is a THRUSH station and I am in charge."

She made a mock-pout, but from the wicked gleam in her green eyes it was clear that she was playing with Klaanger, and disciplining him at the same time:

"If you spoke to me in polite language—but no. This time I can't grant your request, General. Perhaps you'll learn your lesson."

Klaanger flushed deep red. The THRUSH soldiers muttered among themselves, obviously pleased at this effective display of authority by their superior. Vanessa tickled Solo's chin with a long scarlet fingernail.

"Besides, General," she said. "I think they'll have a delightful time in the pit."

Illya glowered. "Did you say the pit, Miss Robin?"

"Oh," said Vanessa, "so you know me too?"

"One doesn't have to see a skunk to recognize it. The smell is—"

Vanessa smacked Illya with an oversized fist, nearly upsetting his guards as well. Instantly she struggled to compose herself. She took a deep breath, said:

"We can all benefit from a little relaxation. This has been a most taxing day." Blithe again, she snapped her fingers. Soldiers hustled to seize Solo.

"You can at least do us the courtesy of telling us what the pit is," he said.

"Oh, just a place that the baron who once lived here used for rebellious subjects."

"What kind of place?" Illya inquired.

Vanessa's white teeth sparkled as she smiled. "A lovely place with an observation window we've built in. A place where my associates and I can relax and have a highball and watch the two of you put on an amusing show while you die. Bring them along, both of them. And quickly!"

TWO

The pit, as Napoleon Solo and Illya sound found out to their dismay, had absolutely sheer sides. It was a perfect cylinder, illuminated by a single light high up in the solid stone ceiling.

That ceiling was at least twenty feet above the tightly-packed dirt floor on which they found themselves unceremoniously dumped by their THRUSH captors. Immediately the steel portal through which they had been pushed clanged shut. They heard the *pong* of electric bolts ramming home. Opposite they saw a similar steel port, also closed. It was barely three feet tall, and twice as wide as a regular door.

While Solo speculated upon what noxious poison fumes would probably come curling in upon them, Illya walked round and round the base of the cylinder. The pit was constructed entirely of ancient and faintly damp blocks of stone.

"Very exciting so far," Solo said.

"Don't make jokes, please."

"What else can I do? Yell for a Boy Scout to lend assistance?"

"It's a thought." Dourly Illya contemplated their surroundings. "If it hadn't been for Dr. Bauer catching you the way he did, we might have made it."

"Well, we didn't make it. So now we have to figure a way out of here."

A somber silence fell. The two U.N.C.L.E. agents had worked together long enough to know that false high spirits weren't going to help now.

Solo paced. So did Illya. Behind the smaller steel door they heard a peculiar snuffling or coughing.

Abruptly, amplified tinnily through a speaker, they heard Vanessa Robin say:

"Please don't stop the brittle conversation, gentlemen. We were enjoying it no end."

Illya and Solo snapped around, craned upward. An entire section of the stone block wall had slid aside to reveal a thick safety-glass window about six feet wide. The curved window was recessed into the wall of the pit about three feet above their heads.

Beyond the window, Vanessa Robin and Felix Klaanger lifted their right hands in a mock toast. Each held a dark brown highball. Lesser THRUSH lights crowded up behind them to watch the spectacle. The U.N.C.L.E. agents stood their ground and glared.

"Well," came Vanessa's voice again, "I suppose we might as well start the show if you've both run out of epigrams." She reached out to touch a control hidden by the window's edge.

The short steel panel behind them shot aside. They saw a dark stone tunnel from which issued that unusual coughing, plus a decidedly gamy animal smell.

"I must tell you," Vanessa said, "that we keep the poor creature on a starvation diet for occasions such as this. It will be interesting to see which one of you he selects for his first course—"

Crouching against the curved wall opposite the tunnel mouth, Napoleon Solo saw a pair of shining eyes regarding him with what appeared to be hunger. "Good Lord," he breathed as the thing's claws ticked on the stone and it lumbered forward into the pit—an immense, barrel-shaped, club-headed Bavarian brown bear with a wet black snout and dripping white fangs.

Illya Kuryakin looked at the monster and flattened his back against the wall.

"Try not to attract his attention," he whispered.

Both agents remained motionless. The bear lumbered one step forward, then another. It wagged its immense head from side to side, its large, brown, dumb eyes fixed on a point just between the two agents. It became obvious that the bear had located its prey.

The long, lolling red tongue shot out. The bear licked its chops. With a deep growl it started forward again.

When it had reached the midway point in the dirt floor, it paused. Then, ponderously, it swung its head to the right until its snout was pointing directly at Solo.

"If it lunges at me," Solo whispered, "you go out through the tunnel."

"Impossible," Vanessa's voice blared over the speaker. "There are thick bars, and a guard, at the other end."

Solo swallowed hard. The bear advanced again, baring its fangs. Illya was leaning down slowly, very slowly. Very carefully he dug the fingers of his right hand into the dirt.

Solo started to circle to the left around the wall, also slowly. The bear changed course, its huge foot pads making marks in the dirt. Abruptly, with a slavering roar, it lunged forward.

Napoleon Solo dodged wildly to the left. Not fast enough! The furry monster crashed against him, flattening him in the dirt.

Horrible weight crushed down on top of him as he tried to roll out from under. The bear snarled and bit at his head. Solo wrenched his head savagely to one side to avoid the bite.

The bear growled ferociously. Drool dripped off its tongue on to Solo's forehead. The bear dipped its head again to bite, and just at that second Illya darted in and flung a handful of stinging dirt into the creature's eyes.

Startled, the bear automatically chomped its jaws shut. Solo dragged his left arm out of the path of those murderous teeth and ripped himself to the right, out from under. The bear snapped blindly at him, tearing his shirt and leaving painful teeth marks that oozed blood on his left forearm. From the loudspeaker came a mocking patter of applause.

The bear gathered itself on all fours, shook its immense shoulders as Solo carefully backed away from it. There was, unfortunately, no place to run. Next time, Solo knew, he might not be so lucky.

With another mighty growl the bear leaped. Napoleon Solo dodged to one side. His left foot skidded in the dirt. He went down to one knee. The bear charged straight at his head, slavering jaws opening wide and wet and red.

Chommmp! The jaws shut, snatching something out of mid-air, a scarlet something which, incredibly, had sailed out of the mouth of the tunnel.

Now the bear tore at this, worrying it back and forth. Another, similar item sailed into the pit. Then two more.

Solo watched the bear go wild and attempt to ingest all four huge, succulent raw slabs of meat into its maw at once. There was a hiss from the tunnel.

Overhead, Vanessa Robin and Klaanger and the others shouted and cursed. Content with a less-than-human meal, bruin was sitting on his haunches, masticating bone, gristle and meat with loud crunching sounds. And on hands and knees inside the tunnel, her cheeks and knuckles smeared with meat juice, was the person who had called to them and tossed the meat in to save them.

"I stabbed the guard and—unlocked the bars," Helene Bauer panted. "I didn't know whether I could get here in time with the meat. I stole it from the kitchens. Hurry, the bear is nearly finished—" And she backed hastily down the tunnel.

Illya's face lit with hope. "Don't stand on ceremony, for heaven's sake!" He dove into the tunnel on all fours.

Solo followed immediately. Over the loudspeaker, Vanessa Robin shrieked in rage. An alarm klaxon began to scream; alerting the entire garrison to the atttempted escape.

THREE

Napoleon Solo banged his skull, shins and elbows as he crawled along the gamy-smelling tunnel with all possible speed. Illya reached the tunnel's end and tumbled out on to a ramp which ran down from the tunnel to the floor of a small cement-block room. Half of one of the other walls was the entrance to the bear's cage. A large section of bars had been slid aside, and a musky effluvium of straw and droppings floated from the dark place beyond.

On the floor of the small chamber sprawled the THRUSH animal handler, an electric prod in his lifeless fingers and a short kitchen knife projecting from his throat.

"Not very neat," Illya commented. "But let's not quibble."

Helene was trembling, obviously struggling to keep her fear under control. "I—I've never killed anyone before—"

"What happened? I thought you were one of the chief lady storm troopers of the Fourth Reich," Solo grunted as he unbent himself on the ramp outside the tunnel. He reached up and slammed a switch which lowered the bars into place. Behind, in the pit, the klaxon still howled.

Helene gave a quick, uncertain nod. "I thought I believed it. I pretended to be as tough as the next. But I've never killed. Not until now." Her head lifted. All the explanation the two U.N.C.L.E. agents needed was contained in the furious blaze of her eyes and the bitter way she said, "When that woman shot Papa, as if he were nothing, nothing but a lump of mud—everything changed. I had to strike back at them."

"We'd better get moving," Illya warned. "How do we get out of here?"

"The main gate of the estate is heavily guarded," the girl said.

Solo's eyes crinkled down to worried slits. "And the troops will be out in force."

Illya said, "I left two THRUSH fellows sleeping at another gate on the far side of the parade ground."

"Then let's try that," Solo said. "Helene, lead on."

The girl's wide black leather belt caught dull reflections from the ceiling lights as she spun around and unbolted an iron door. "This stairway leads up to a delivery passageway."

In the distance boots slammed. Other klaxons picked up the bleating *ooogah-ooogah* of the first. With Helene racing beside them, the two U.N.C.L.E. agents took the steps upward two at a time.

Solo was strangely conscious of the jaws of a trap closing unseen somewhere around them. His palms ran with cold sweat. Like a warning, the outraged bellow of the frustrated bear drifted after them.

They reached a feebly-lit landing.

"Here is the entrance to the delivery passageway," Helene whispered. She pressed her hands against a steel door patterned with rivets. Illya put his shoulder against it to help her roll it aside. Solo peered out.

To the left, a high, wide concrete passage ran back to double doors with round glass portholes blacked out with paint. To the right the passage opened on to what appeared to be a loading dock. A small, nondescript van was backed up to the dock. Beyond this vehicle Solo glimpsed the flood-lit parade ground, curiously green, empty, silent. In the far distance the wall reared up again.

"Decidedly peculiar," Illya whispered.

Even pitched low, his voice bounced eerily from the walls of the delivery passage. A field mouse nibbling at a wilted brown lettuce leaf inside a produce crate was the only living thing visible anywhere in the passage. The mouse raised its head, wiggled its nose, blinked its small ruby-colored eyes at them and bounded away into the thick-clustered shadows.

"Peculiar," Illya repeated. "No noise now. The klaxons have stopped. I should think Miss Robin and her cohorts would be boxing us in by remote control, locking every single door in the place until we were trapped."

"Maybe they're watching us on scanners," Solo suggested.

Illya chewed his lip. There were large circles of fatigue under his eyes. "Shall we see? They took my weapons away when they caught me, but evidently they thought they were leaving me my cigarettes."

From his pants pocket Illya pulled a gaudily-printed cigarette package. He flicked his thumbnail against the top. The lid popped open on a spring; the communicator was meticulously disguised with foil paper and cellophane.

"Napoleon," Illya said as he set a recessed control stud, "in the event that we don't get out alive, we should make certain that this little corner of the THRUSH empire ceases to function."

Solo nodded.

He gave a bleak nod. Illya breathed, "Open Channel D, please. Extreme priority, class triple-A red."

In a moment there came a measured voice:

"Alexander Waverly here."

"Kuryakin, sir."

"Mr. Kuryakin! Good heavens, I've been worrying about you for hours!"

"We've managed to stay alive so far, sir. How much longer we can do so is problematical."

Mr. Waverly went *hmmm*. "That serious, eh? Where are you?"

"Somewhere in the Schwarzwald, sir. I can't give you the exact coordinates. We're trapped inside the research station where THRUSH is manufacturing its Goliaths. We may or may not be able to get all the way out."

"Mr. Solo is there with you?"

"Yes, sir."

Static crackled for a few seconds as Mr. Waverly digested the news. In a more somber tone he said, "Please put Solo on."

Illya passed the small unit to his friend. When Solo had acknowledged, Waverly asked, "Mr. Solo, as senior Operations and Enforcement officer on this mission, what is your assessment of the threat posed by the THRUSH operation you have penetrated?"

Solo licked his lips. The words were difficult to say:

"Grave, sir. Just as we feared, these agents they're turning out—both men and women—are incredible." Solo avoided Illya's eyes. "We called in to recommend action, sir. A bomber strike. As quickly as it can be arranged. I can switch this unit to a homing frequency to guide them in."

Mr. Waverly coughed. "What is your personal situation as of this moment, Mr. Solo?"

In a few words Solo explained their predicament. Waverly was silent a second. Then:

"You may not be able to escape by the time the planes arrive. I have just consulted our system maps. According to my rough calculation, as soon as I flash the request overseas through London, a fighter-bomber squadron

already airborne will be on its way. Perhaps a matter of ten minutes at supersonic speeds until they arrive."

Solo's temples hurt. Helene watched him with round, horrified eyes. Solo tried to keep his emotions out of play. He tried to remember that all of his professional traning had pointed to this moment—the moment when an U.N.C.L.E. agent had to make the last, hardest decision and place his own life and the life of others secondary to the preservation of the United Network Command.

It still wasn't an easy decision to make. Solo thought of the pleasures he enjoyed. Good wine. The aroma of freshly-broiled lobster. The raspberry tang of a girl's lips—

"Send in the strike, sir," he said.

Mr. Waverly said, "Good luck and God speed, Mr. Solo. Over and out."

The communicator went silent. And the clock began to run out for the three of them.

FOUR

Solo had switched to the proper channel. The communicator was now sending its homing signal into the sky, where it would be picked up at a range of fifty miles by the squadron of fighter-bombers that would soon be flashing in.

"All right," he said in a strained voice. "Let's make the most of the time we've got."

The three of them broke for the mouth of the tunnel. Their heels clacked loudly. Still the entire THRUSH estate was shrouded in a weird stillness. Solo emerged onto the loading dock. He cut to the left. Illya and Helene crowded up behind. Ahead, the green grass of the parade ground moved gently under a night breeze.

The tall floodlight stanchions shed a sharp radiance onto the empty expanse of turf. Solo dropped to the asphalt below the dock, helped Helene down.

Illya's eyes flicked from left to right and back again, hunting for signs of the trap which surely existed.

Solo edged his way around a parked lorry. He wished that he had a pistol, any kind of weapon.

The parade ground was wide, green, empty. And it looked like a journey of a thousand miles to that small booth which Illya pointed out on the far wall.

"Ready?" Solo asked.

Illya nodded, wiped a trickle of sweat from his chin.

Solo half-turned. "Helene?"

"I can make it."

With a quick bob of his head, Solo started running. The other two came right behind.

Their feet thudded softly on the turf as they charged toward the far wall. At any moment Solo expected to hear the stutter of machineguns from the high cornices of the great house. The wind keened eerily in his ears as he ran. Breath pumped in and out of his lungs.

He flashed a look back over his shoulder. Lights blazed in the curtained windows of the upper floors of the great house, but nowhere was there another human being moving.

They had safely crossed about a quarter of the distance to the booth in the wall.

Abruptly the trap sprang open behind them—literally out of the ground.

Whole sections of the parade ground flipped upward. The turf was imitation, laid down atop hinged steel plates like square manhole covers. The night was suddenly filled with an incredible wordless shrieking as up from the underground warrens surged the black-uniformed THRUSH girls, tall, hate-faced, their hair streaming.

Their voices were raised in that chilling unison shriek of hate. Gun barrels winked. Boots shone. A dozen of them had come up through the sprung-back ports in the grass now.

Two dozen.

Three.

They fanned out and formed a long line, a human chain of women. From the parapets of the baronial hall, searchlights blinked on. Solo and his friends, running wildly, were pinned inside great white circles of brilliant light.

An automatic pistol stuttered. Illya gave a sharp cry and went down, blood blackening the left leg of his trousers.

Helene doubled back to help him. Solo had the feeling he'd take a bullet any second too. Through the stillness the unison chant of hate was dying out. The echo of the pistol burst was spun away on the breeze.

Like a sharp knife slicing through cheese, Vanessa Robin boomed over a bullhorn:

"No firing! *No firing!* Hold your fire until further signals are given!"

Solo twisted around, bent to pull Illya to his feet. Illya had gone pale. His eyes were glazing. Vanessa Robin, bullhorn in her left hand and a long-snouted pistol in her right, had emerged from the sprung-back trapdoor which was furthest on Solo's left. Climbing up the ladder after her came Felix Klaanger.

Klaanger's eyes glared like brown lanterns. His bulbous, lemon-shaped head waggled with delight.

"*It will do you no good to run, Solo,*" Vanessa boomed over the horn.

"They've caught us," Helene sobbed. "I knew they would." She was on the edge of hysteria. Her whole body trembled as she tried to help Solo support Illya. "I—I have never seen these hellish traps before—"

Solo whispered, "THRUSH, doesn't tell all, eh? Doesn't matter. Keep moving. Back toward the wall."

"*Stand where you are, Solo!*"

"Come on, Illya, we can make it," Solo breathed, ignoring Vanessa's orders. "The closer we are to that wall, the better chance we have."

It was false encouragement; Solo knew they had no chance at all. But he would not stand and surrender.

Illya's wounded leg left a smear of bright blood on the grass as Solo dragged him along. They must have made a sorry sight, Solo thought, the three of them huddling and limping backwards, confronted by three dozen armed amazons with pistols and rifles.

The THRUSH women seemed to strain forward, eager for blood. Vanessa Robin knocked the bullhorn against her leg in a gesture of anger.

"Very well, Solo," she thundered, horn at her lips again. "Since you wish to continue the charade, we'll finish you in style. My girls are eager to get at the three of you. But you have no weapons. And you are burdened by poor Mr. Kuryakin hanging in your arms like a potato sack. So perhaps we should let you feel the real strength of THRUSH before you die."

Vanessa Robin turned and executed a kind of mocking little bow of invitation to Klaanger standing beside her.

The misshapen hulk straightened up. A slack grin of delight crawled across his liverish lips. His huge hands twitched at the ends of his incredibly long arms.

"General Klaanger and I will do the honors, Solo." Vanessa waved her left hand at him, the fingers fluttering in a dainty, lady-like way that was somehow horrible. "*With our hands.*"

Flinging aside the horn for the last time, she began to walk forward. She unfastened a golden clip which held her hair in place. She shook her head. Her hair fell loose, trailing blonde and glittering to her waist.

As she walked she smoothed her tunic. Klaanger shambled forward beside her, cracking his knuckles.

Solo and Helene, meantime, had continued to back up steadily. Helene whispered, "The wall—"

Simultaneously, Solo's shoes caught in something which nearly caused him to stumble. He glanced down.

They had reached the patch of stones just under the wall and to one side of the booth which sheltered a door that led through the wall. Solo gauged the distances.

No go.

Vanessa and Klaanger were running now, running with their faces full of malicious triumph, two immensely tall, immensely powerful creatures. If Solo tried to get Illya through the gate, Vanessa and Klaanger would be on them first.

Solo suddenly felt small, weak, powerless to cope with the two monster-people charging toward him. They would finish him no matter how hard he fought.

"Helene!" he whispered. "Drag Illya into the booth. I'll hold them back."

"But you cannot stand against them!"

"*Do as I tell you!*"

Thud-thud-thud-thud. In the silence of the windy parade ground, the boot-soles of Vanessa Robin and Felix Klaanger thudded on the turf. Another five or ten seconds and they would be on top of him.

Klaanger's fingers flexed as he ran; flexed in anticipation of getting hold of Solo's arms and legs and ripping them out of their sockets; flexed in anticipation of tearing his body apart like a hunk of meat from the butcher's counter.

Alone, weaponless, cold in his belly and slightly dizzy, Solo stood his ground. He'd stand them off as long as he could.

Helene had responded to his order. She was dragging Illya's unconscious form toward the booth.

Thud-thud-thud-thud.

Vanessa's hair streamed out behind. Her slanting green eyes were infinitely cruel. Klaanger laughed from deep in his gigantic chest, the laugh of a beast. Far back at the edge of the sky, Solo though he heard a thin, whistling whine. It was probably only his imagination.

His eyes were blurred. The monstrously tall, monstrously strong pair came charging steadily on while he braced himself there on the patch of stones, hoping to fight as long as possible with his bare hands before they tore him apart—

Thud-thud-thud-thud.

Almost three-quarters of the distance was gone. They raced with incredible speed, like a pair of—what had Illya said?

Yes. Like the Biblical giant.

Like Goliaths—

Suddenly Solo's mind clicked over.

He shot out his right hand, gesturing.

"Helene. *Helene!* Give me your belt."

Confused, fumbling, she unfastened the brass buckle and threw the belt. Solo caught it in the air. Almost growling like an animal, he chewed at the leather, ripped at it till he had bitten a small hole through the belt.

He dropped to one knee. He grabbed a medium-sized stone from the path, wedged it into the makeshift hole and, gripping both ends of the belt so that it formed a long loop with the stone at the bottom, he whipped the belt around and around over his head and let one end go -

There was a quick, whizzing sound.

Vanessa Robin screamed and fell.

The stone was imbedded in the center of her forehead and her smashed frontal skull oozed blood.

Klaanger howled with maniacal rage. He shot his hands out in front of him, mindless, maddened, wanting only to kill the little man dancing back and forth in front of him, the wiry little man from U.N.C.L.E. who had knelt down again, fitted a stone into the belt and was whirling the belt around and around above his head -

"Filthy, filthy!" Klaanger shrieked, charging on, "Filthy, *I kill you!*"

Solo let go of one end of the long belt.

The stone sped with a deadly buzz.

And missed.

"Filthy, filthy U.N.C.L.E. man!" Klaanger howled with glee, zigzagging now to present a more difficult target.

Solo fumbled with another stone. He got it wedged into the hole in the belt.

Klaanger was no more than fifteen yards away. His great brown eyes shone like mad lanterns.

Around and around Solo whipped the belt in the air over his head. His arm-muscles were tormented with the pain of the effort—

"Filthy, filthy, I kill—" Klaanger screamed, hands questing out in front of him.

The stone flew from the improvised sling.

Klaanger choked, rocked back in his tracks. He clawed at his throat where the stone had struck.

From his neck a red spout of blood shot forth, splattering the grass.

With a gurgling, witless yell of frustration, the last of the two Goliaths fell.

On the parade ground a frenzied yell of hate went up from the throats of the THRUSH girls. They pulled their rifles and pistols into firing position, just as the low whistling whine Solo had heard a few moments before became a metallic banshee wail. The first of the silver-pale fighter bombers came in over the Schwarzwald and the parade ground, laying down a stick of bombs that Solo saw tumble in lazy, slow-motion fashion in those surrealistic moments when he turned and plunged for the booth.

He snatched Illya's body up over his shoulder and literally kicked Helene ahead of him into the booth and out through the door in the wall.

He didn't have to urge Helene to run after that. Panic got hold of her, real panic. She sped along beside him as they plunged into the forest and pelted ahead in the dark, banging against trees, bashing their heads against limbs -

The night opened up behind them into a bloom of fire and smoke and blasting thunderclaps.

The shock wave blasted Napoleon Solo and Helene to the ground. His forehead smacked the earth heavily.

Fireworks and fury lit up in his mind.

He fainted.

Fingers stroked his cheeks. Solo groaned, he opened his eyes.

At once his skull began to vibrate like the head of a snare drum. He kept his eyes closed a moment in the cool darkness, inhaling the fragrance of pine and fir.

Gradually the throbbing ceased. He opened his eyes again and got his bearings.

He was lying on his back with his head in Helene Bauer's lap. She was either laughing or crying. He couldn't quite tell which until he felt the warm tears dropping gently onto his dirty, sweat-streaked face.

Above him he saw gently soughing treetops. A scarlet glow washed the undersides of their leaves. He tried to struggle up: "Illya—"

From the near dark a familiar voice said weakly, "Here. I'm awake. I think I'll make it, although this wretched leg certainly hurts."

"The bombers—" Solo asked.

Helene was sobbing softly: "Gone, all gone. The headquarters is gone too. There were awful screams in the smoke. Now there's nothing but the fire—"

Suddenly she bent and pressed her cheek against Solo's.

"What will they do to me? What will they do to me for working with THRUSH?"

He wanted to tell her that because she'd helped them escape the authorities might mitigate her punishment. He couldn't find the words. He was bone-tired. The night swam around him, a confusing of swaying boughs and flickering red lights and, somewhere, a last piercing moan of agony as the last of the super-creatures of THRUSH perished in the bombed-out ruins.

Illya Kuryakin said:

"Why is it, Napoleon, why is it that, no matter what happens, no matter *what* horrors we pass through, no matter *what* nightmares fall upon us, *you* always manage to emerge as the one to have your head cradled in the girl's lap?"

Napoleon Solo felt Helene's soft, soothing fingers.

He croaked, "Takes talent," and promptly fainted once again.

THE END

* * * * *

home
posted 7.13.2002, transcribed by Graculus